



Bolan must stop the ruthless
trade in human lives

Don Pendleton's
The Executioner®
DESPERATE CARGO



It wouldn't be the first time the Executioner had been forced to rethink a mission

The chill draft caused by the train's motion buffeted him and pulled at his clothing. From the tracks the ground fell away in a long grassy slope. Some way ahead he could see clusters of lights, indicating some habitation. A town. That meant people and maybe the chance to gain some other kind of transportation.

The sudden shriek of the train's whistle alerted him. The train reduced its speed somewhat. He watched the ground some feet below. It still seemed to be moving by at a dangerous speed.

He figured it wasn't going to get better than this. He was about to take a calculated risk—one that might leave him injured. But if he decided to stay on the train he could find himself in the hands of the authorities and his freedom might become a thing of the past. Bolan swung around so he faced the way the train was moving, waited for the clearest patch of slope and went for it.

MACK BOLAN®

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The Executioner

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Don Pendleton's
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DESPERATE CARGO



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It is easy to be brave behind a castle wall.

—Welsh proverb

The men who hide behind their wealth and pretend to be brave will pay the ultimate price.

—Mack Bolan

**THE
MACK BOLAN
LEGEND**

Nothing less than a war could have fashioned the destiny of the man called Mack Bolan. Bolan earned the Executioner title in the jungle hell of Vietnam.

But this soldier also wore another name—Sergeant Mercy. He was so tagged because of the compassion he showed to wounded comrades-in-arms and Vietnamese civilians.

Mack Bolan’s second tour of duty ended prematurely when he was given emergency leave to return home and bury his family, victims of the Mob. Then he declared a one-man war against the Mafia.

He confronted the Families head-on from coast to coast, and soon a hope of victory began to appear. But Bolan had broken society’s every rule. That same society started gunning for this elusive warrior—to no avail.

So Bolan was offered amnesty to work within the system against terrorism. This time, as an employee of Uncle Sam, Bolan became Colonel John Phoenix. With a command center at Stony Man Farm in Virginia, he and his new allies—Able Team and Phoenix Force—waged relentless war on a new adversary: the KGB.

But when his one true love, April Rose, died at the hands of the Soviet terror machine, Bolan severed all ties with Establishment authority.

Now, after a lengthy lone-wolf struggle and much soul-searching, the Executioner has agreed to enter an “arm’s-

length” alliance with his government once more, reserving the right to pursue personal missions in his Everlasting War.

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Prologue

During its long, slow voyage from Thailand, the *Orient Venturer* made a number of calls into friendly ports. Sometimes it was to take on more cargo, or to unload. It refueled and during those stays in port the captain played host to officials who marked his cargo as legitimate and departed the ship with considerably more cash in their pockets than they'd had when they boarded.

The *Orient Venturer's* voyage was one it had made a number of times. In its hold, or in the steel seagoing containers secured to its rusting and scarred deck plates, it carried the mixed cargo that marked it as a ship of all trades. The cargo—mainly clothing and electrical goods, manufactured in Asian sweatshops—would find its way into stores and retail outlets spread across Europe. Cheaply made, the goods would be sold at marked-up prices for Western consumers. These items brought a fair profit for the company that owned the ship.

One container, however, held cargo that would net an even greater profit for the men behind the *Orient Venturer*.

The special cargo was stowed in a special container. A close inspection would have shown that the container had been altered to facilitate its cargo.

In the roof were a number of vented grilles to allow air to travel in and out of the steel box. This was necessary in order to keep the cargo of young Thai women and children alive.

The eldest woman was twenty-two, the youngest twelve. They were all kidnap victims, intended for sale when they reached their destination. They had no choice in the matter because they were virtual slaves. They'd been stolen from their homes for induction into the twilight world of human trafficking. At journey's end they would be passed along to their new masters. Some would be forced into the garment industry where they would work endless hours for starvation wages. Others would be moved into prostitution, the sex industry, or they would go as personal playthings for

wealthy clients. The younger and prettier a girl, the more likely she would be bought for sexual gratification.

Business was thriving. The *Orient Venturer* made regular trips delivering the cargo to mainland Europe and the United Kingdom. The men behind the business were based in Rotterdam and London. The organization conducted business globally, procuring assets for clients in the Middle East and the United States. It was well run, protected because of weak legislation and the inability of legal forces to act without absolute and watertight cases. One slip, one word or phrase, on a document, and the whole case could be thrown out of court. Proof positive was almost an impossibility, and although a dedicated effort was being made, no indictments had yet been achieved. Government task forces working together had their hands tied. They struggled for months to concentrate their investigations only to find that their superiors, sensitive to the demands of the courts, would shake their heads and demand even more proof.

The task forces looked for ways to gather their evidence and took the decision to insert undercover agents into the organization in an effort to obtain what they needed.

Dean Turner and Ron Bentley were seasoned agents, working for the joint task force. When they had been asked to take on a covert assignment to infiltrate the trafficking group in Rotterdam they didn't need to be asked twice. Once assigned they distanced themselves from the main group, setting themselves up to watch suspected members of the trafficking organization. Over a couple of months they concentrated on the Rotterdam group, looking for any members who seemed to be vulnerable to turning, and finally fixed on a single individual who expressed some vocal dissatisfaction with his position within the organization.

The initial contact went well. Their man seemed to have a grievance against his employers and a tendency to complain about them to the American undercover agents. They spent time with him, sympathizing with his complaints, and slowly reeled him into their confidence. In the end he agreed to provide them with evidence that would give the task force solid evidence into the workings of the trafficking group.

However, when the agents made the rendezvous to meet their contact they were ambushed, disarmed and taken to an isolated location.

They were told they were going to be made examples of—used to show the task force that further efforts to break the organization were useless. The

traffickers wanted the international task force to know powerful forces ranged against them. The organization had high-profile protection. They could not be touched. No one could harm them. The agents would be used to make the task force realize they were simply wasting their time.

For three days the agents were savagely tortured, their naked bodies abused and broken. Photographs were taken to be sent to the task force and a final message stated where the bodies could be found.

The stark warning, showing the brazen contempt the traffickers had for the task force, had its effect. After the bodies had been located and removed, the task force was ordered to stand back and reassess its operational method. There was a need to regroup—by no means to admit defeat, but the clear message to the task force from the traffickers had got through, and it was realized that the enemy had the upper hand.

1

From the window of his hotel room Mack Bolan could see the distant configuration of Rotterdam Port, the night sky ablaze with lights. He saw a vast sprawl of warehouse units, cranes and endless rows of steel cargo containers. He was seeing the vista through the sheeting rain covering the city, blown in from the cold swells of the North Sea. Across the stretch of water was England, the secondary target of Bolan's mission.

The Executioner's presence in Rotterdam was down to intel he received during a briefing with Hal Brognola back in Washington. That clandestine meeting between the man from Justice and Bolan had kick-started the Executioner's journey to Europe. After touching down at Schiphol Airport, Bolan had ridden a local train to Rotterdam and his prebooked room. The weather had been rough for most of the flight and stayed the course while Bolan had transferred to his hotel. It was midevening, the sky already dark. Bolan had a rendezvous with a contact the next day, so he figured he would have an early meal and turn in. The turbulent weather during the flight had denied him sleep, so a solid night's rest was advisable.

Bolan turned from the window when he heard a tap on his door. He crossed the room and opened up. A trolley was wheeled inside carrying the meal he had ordered. Bolan handed the service girl a tip, then closed and locked the door after she left. Bolan was on alert. He wasn't the paranoid type who saw threats lurking in every corner. Even so, past experience had taught him never to leave anything to chance.

He took off the covers and checked the meal. It was exactly what he had ordered. A steak, potatoes, salad. He pulled up a chair and settled down to eat. The food was good. Only when he was done did he activate his tri-band cell phone and tap the speed-dial number that would connect him with Hal Brognola. The connection hummed and buzzed, then the big Fed's voice reached Bolan.

"So how is Rotterdam?"

“Cold. It’s raining like it’s in for the duration. I’m fine. You have any updates for me?”

“No. Status hasn’t changed much since we talked and you flew out. The operation is stalled. The heads are talking. Trying to come up with a fresh way of moving on, but as of now it’s a no-go. Those two agents getting killed has hit hard. You know why. Suspicions there was a mole inside the task force appear to have been proved. Turner and Bentley were betrayed and the fact we have someone operating inside the group and capable of passing along information makes everyone suspicious of the man next to him. No one is going to commit to anything.”

“Let’s hope my meeting in the morning throws up something useful,” the Executioner said.

Brognola hesitated before he replied.

“Tread carefully with this man Bickell. Hasn’t been proved he was the one who turned Turner and Bentley over to the opposition but he was the only man who had access to them. The more I think about it, the less I’m in favor of you using him.”

“Right now we don’t have anything else. I’m not about to go into this meet blind.”

“Striker, these people are bad. You saw what they did to our two mans. They work a business that treats human beings like so much merchandise. Don’t believe they won’t do the same to you given the chance.”

“Understood, pal, now quit worrying and give me some good news.”

“Your Brit buddy,” Brognola said, referring to David McCarter, the Phoenix Force commander, “has a contact for you in London. He can set you up with specialist equipment. I’m sending a photo over your phone for identification. And I’ll text a name and phone number to set up your meet. This man is supposed to be good. He’ll sort out anything you want. Anything else you need right now?”

“Just a good night’s sleep,” Bolan said. “I’ll be in touch.”

Bolan checked the information Brognola had sent to him. A half hour later he turned in, clicking off the light. He lay staring at the rain-flecked window, his mind still active as he reviewed the past couple of days and the events that had brought him to Rotterdam and his upcoming meeting with a man who might turn out to be a Judas.

Two Days Earlier, Washington

DRESSED IN CASUAL clothing he might have been just another tourist taking in the sights of the nation's capital.

But Mack Bolan was a world away from being just that. As he strolled around in the pale sunlight, observing the scene around him, Hal Brognola fell into step beside him.

"Looking good as ever," Brognola said lightly. "Your lifestyle must suit you."

"You didn't call me just to boost my confidence, Hal."

"Would you believe I need your help on a problem?"

"Go ahead."

"A joint US-UK-European task force has been compromised by the deaths of two of its undercover agents. Dean Turner and Ron Bentley. They had gotten close to the group the task force was investigating. Human trafficking on a big scale. Working out of Europe and serving the needs of clients in Europe and the U.S. Striker, this is as nasty as it gets. These people are running a virtual slave trade. Men, women and even kids." Brognola pointed at the slim briefcase he was carrying. "I have the whole dossier in here. Details the perps. Their locations. Right now the operation has stalled because there's some concern how deep infiltration might have gone. The whole thing is on hold. And while that happens the suspects are still operating. Evidence against them is all suspicion but no substance. Nowhere near enough to even haul anyone in. It's a big organization. Run by an influential head honcho with top-class protection. Hugo Canfield. British citizen. He has a hotshot lawyer with an impeccable record standing behind him. Dutch man called Ludwig van Ryden. And he uses that man every time one of his clients even gets a parking ticket."

"What do you need, Hal?"

"Someone without ties to any part of the task force. A clean slate. No allegiances. Nothing that connects." The big Fed paused. "And someone who can leave the book of rules at home."

Brognola opened his case and extracted a thick folder. He handed it to Bolan. "We can see the end result of this business, Striker. What those bastards do to people. I want to reach the head and cut it off. The task force has its hands tied right now and I'm damn tired of the restrictions holding us back. If I had my way I'd go in all guns blazing but I'd have to fight bureaucracy first and last. I need a lever. Something I can use to force the game into the open."

“Where would I start?”

“Our dead agents had an informant. Part of the organization but he convinced our mans he wanted to quit and was willing to cooperate. Name of Wilhelm Bickell. Based in Rotterdam, where the traffickers are said to have what Bickell called a distribution point. We don’t know if that’s true because our mans were killed before they got that information to us. All we have is a cell phone contact number for him.”

“It’s thin,” Bolan said. “But I’ve started with less.” He weighed the folder in his hand. “I’ll need credentials. Anything else you can conjure up.”

Brognola nodded. “No problem.” He tapped the folder. “The phrase *read it and weep* applies pretty well here, Striker.”

THE EXECUTIONER SPENT most of the day going through the contents of the explicit data. It covered suspects, the trafficking group known as Venturer Exports and its head, Hugo Canfield. Its grip on human trafficking was widespread and from the text of the reports Bolan became aware of the callous indifference of the people running the enterprise. The hub for Venturer Exports was mainland Europe and the U.K. Its market was worldwide and even Mack Bolan, well versed in the evil manifested through man’s indifference to human suffering, was forced to sit back and take a moment’s respite. It appeared that the practice of slavery was still thriving. From his reading it seemed that the majority of victims involved came from those ravaged parts of the world where recent conflicts had created rich hunting grounds for the traffickers. They scavenged through Asian and Eastern European countries, snatching people off the streets, collecting them from holding camps. The countless numbers of displaced people were seldom missed. Officials were paid off, heads turned and no questions asked. The victims were bundled into containers and taken by road, across borders where money replaced transit visas, and the human cargo was waved through without an inspection. The final destination of the converging containers appeared to be Rotterdam, and from there the merchandise was sent to whichever market placed its order.

The slaves provided cheap labor for sweatshops, for service industries, where the employers held the workers illegally. They were in foreign countries without proper papers, earning little money and constantly under

the threat of violence if they made any kind of protest. Young women, chosen for their good looks, were channeled into the many-tentacled sex industry, from making adult movies to working the streets. And there was the ever-present shadow of the drug business in the background. The data Brognola had provided included photographs that emphasized the ever-present dangers encroaching on the lives of the traffickers' victims. The sick, the dying and the dead. Drug affliction. The punishment meted out to a victim who had rebelled. Or those who simply succumbed to the pitiful life forced on them.

Read it and weep.

Brognola's words had not been far from the truth. Venturer Exports and the men profiting from it had to be stopped. The Executioner was onboard.

2

Wilhelm Bickell, average height, near-bald head glistening from the rain, hunched his shoulders beneath the long raincoat. Bolan recognized him from the photograph in the folder Brognola had provided. The image had been taken from a distance, but it was not difficult to identify the man. Bickell had an extraordinarily plain face. His outstanding feature was his large, crooked nose supporting a pair of heavy eyeglasses. According to the intelligence relating to the man, Bickell was a fixer for Venturer Exports. The detail provided by Turner and Bentley had him down as dissatisfied with his position. A disgruntled employee passed over by his superiors, tired of being treated as mere hired help. He was supposedly ready to turn against them for the simple emotion of revenge. The two agents had nurtured his feelings, fueling his resentment. They had been preparing Bickell as an aide in gaining possession of evidence that might have turned the task-force investigation to a positive outcome. That hope died after they had been lured into a meeting, taken captive and tortured savagely before being killed.

The Executioner kept those thoughts in mind as he stepped away from the café door and crossed the sidewalk to where Bickell was standing.

“Wilhelm Bickell? I’m Cooper.”

Bickell nodded.

Bolan took his hand from his coat pocket and palmed the leather wallet holding the U.S. Justice Department badge Brognola had supplied. Next to the badge, beneath a plastic cover was a laminated card with Bolan’s picture and cover name on it.

Bickell’s eyes, magnified by the lenses of his glasses, examined the big American’s face. The only contact he had had with Bolan was over the phone, arranging the meet. He recognized the voice.

“This is not a very satisfactory way for us to meet, you understand. *Ja?*”

“Under the circumstances I was given little choice. Turner and Bentley didn’t leave much in the way of contact details. You remember them, don’t

you?”

Bickell visibly stiffened. Red spots colored his pale cheeks.

“Of course I remember them. We were working together. Am I under suspicion concerning their deaths? Perhaps you are not aware of the risk I took even associating with them. My own life is in danger now.”

“We’re all in a risky position, Bickell. I came to Rotterdam to try and pick up where the others left off. Are you willing to continue cooperating?”

“Of course,” Bickell said. “I am ready to help any way I can.”

A little too quickly, Bolan thought. Slow down, Bickell, you’re making yourself obvious.

“We should walk,” Bickell suggested. “I really feel I am being watched. You understand? *Ja?*”

“Let’s go,” Bolan said.

Bickell led the way along the sidewalk. The rain and the early hour had reduced the number of pedestrians. They walked for a few hundred feet before Bickell paused at the mouth of a side street. His hesitation warned Bolan, but for the present he played along.

“There is a quiet coffee shop down here,” Bickell said. “We can talk in private. *Ja?*”

Bolan fell in alongside the man and they walked along the street. The tall buildings on either side reduced the rain to a slight mist. They also cut the intrusion of sound and it enabled Bolan to pick up the soft murmur of a car engine and the sound of wet tires rolling along the street. From the corner of his eye Bolan saw Bickell’s shoulders hunch under his coat. The sound of his footsteps sharpened as he began to walk faster.

“We running out of time?” Bolan asked.

Bickell said something Bolan couldn’t catch. But he understood the threat offered by the pistol that emerged from the right-hand pocket of the man’s coat. The muzzle aimed at Bolan.

“Over there,” Bickell snapped, gesturing with the pistol.

The Executioner saw they were at the entrance to an empty delivery yard, the gates standing open, the adjoining building deserted and quiet. Bickell’s gun hand gestured again and Bolan walked ahead, the Dutchman following. As Bolan turned to face Bickell, the car he had heard turned in through the open gateway and rolled to a stop. A tall man climbed out and pushed the wooden gates shut, dropping a metal bar in place. He moved to stand a few feet behind Bickell, hands thrust deep in the pockets of his thick

coat. A moment later he was joined by the man who had been behind the wheel of the car.

“Tell me, *Mijnheer* Cooper, are you so trusting it never occurred to you that something like this might happen? Or are you simply stupid?” Bickell asked.

“Look at it from where I’m standing. I only arrived last night and it appears I have already been betrayed by the man who set up Turner and Bentley for execution.”

Bickell didn’t like the inference, but shrugged it off.

“That was so easy it was almost embarrassing. Those two were so naive they deserved to die. Like so many Americans they believed in trust and loyalty. It was like shooting fish in a barrel.”

Bickell said something in Dutch to his two companions. It drew a round of laughter.

“So, Cooper, they sent you in like the Lone Ranger to deal with the bad mans. *Ja?*”

Bickell raised his left hand to wipe at the rain spots on his glasses. It created a thin window of opportunity. It was enough for Bolan to bunch his right hand into a big fist that struck out at Bickell’s face. Bolan hit him twice. The blows were powerfully brutal. They slammed into Bickell’s mouth and nose, jerking his head around and toppling him against the side of the parked car. Bickell slid across the rain-slick surface, his legs going from under him. He hit the ground on his knees, head dropping. Blood spilled from his battered face.

“For Turner and Bentley,” Bolan said softly. “Consider it a down payment.”

The pair behind Bickell came alive, producing handguns. They covered Bolan, who had already stepped back, his hands raised in surrender. When they saw he was not going to do anything one of them moved to where Bickell knelt. He reached out a hand and dragged Bickell to his feet, pushing him against the side of the car. He also retrieved the pistol Bickell had dropped. Then he moved up to Bolan and expertly checked him for weapons. Satisfied the American was not armed he rejoined his partner.

Bickell, hands pressed to his bloody face, stared at Bolan. The left lens of his glasses had cracked when Bolan hit him and the single eye left visible blazed with undisguised anger.

“Bastaard.” The invective was muffled but there was enough force for Bolan to understand the feeling behind it.

The man who had searched Bolan moved to open the passenger door and roughly hustled Bickell inside. He slammed the door and walked around to the driver’s door. He barked a command to his partner, who moved to reopen the gate. Then he gestured at Bolan.

“In the back, Cooper.”

Bolan did as he was told. With the gate open the second man climbed in beside Bolan, covering him. The car started and reversed out onto the street. It was driven to the far end, then picked up a wider street that wound through the city. The thought struck Bolan that no one had made any move to prevent him seeing the way they were going. Their ultimate destination looked to be an intended one-way trip for Bolan. He sat back, taking in the scenery, his agile mind working on that fact. His captors wanted him alive for the present. His future was another matter. Once the opposition had decided how much—or how little—he knew about their operation, his usefulness would end. These people had already shown how little they cared when it came to disposing of unwanted baggage.

With that in mind Bolan prepared himself for what might come. He had no illusions. What waited for him at the end of this drive would be far from pleasant if he failed to make use of any opportunity presenting itself. He was not being driven to a barbecue. Pain and suffering were the only items liable to be on any menu put before Bolan.

He concentrated on his captors. The damage he had inflicted on Bickell would keep the man out of any hard action. His injuries would divert his attention away from Bolan. Not a great victory but at least it had cut the opposition by a third. Until they arrived at their destination Bolan wasn’t going to know by how much that percentage might rise. He had assessed the two men accompanying Bickell as solid professionals. It appeared that their orders had been to bring Bolan in alive and unharmed, and they were doing that. Bickell had let his mouth run away with himself and had received the necessary chiding to shut him up temporarily. From the brief time he had been able to watch the others Bolan had seen they were strongly built, capable of handling themselves. And both were armed. Bickell was unarmed, his fallen pistol having been retrieved by the man behind the wheel.

The Executioner sank back in the soft leather seat, watching the wet streets of Rotterdam slip by. As they eased through the narrow streets Bolan caught glimpses of the river that ran through the city. Cranes and warehouses began to dominate the skyline. They were heading in the direction of the port. The car made some sharp turns, moving along narrower streets that edged the main port facility. There were businesses along this section. Distribution warehouses. Service industries. Private vehicles were replaced by vans and trucks. The car made a sharp right turn that took it along a narrow road that paralleled the water before swinging in through open gates into a freight yard that had a large warehouse structure at the far end.

There didn't appear to be much activity around the yard. Bolan noticed a number of large steel containers, some stacked three high. There was a car parked near the warehouse. They drove over the yard's rutted surface and through a high doorway into the warehouse. As the car came to a stop inside Bolan heard the metallic rattle behind them as a metal roller door was lowered.

Bolan's minder produced his pistol, gesturing. "Get out."

With the pair of minders flanking him Bolan was walked across to an office block against one wall. The door was opened and he was pushed inside. Bolan sized up the man awaiting his arrival.

Well dressed. A sober suit and tie. Expensive. The cold expression on his face did nothing to endear him to Bolan. He had a fine look to him. Almost delicate. His skin was silky, lips colorless, pale blond hair. Rimless glasses with lightly tinted lenses shaded his gray eyes. He was observing Bolan with an intensity that could have been intimidating to anyone with less confidence.

"Where's Bickell?" the man asked.

Bolan picked up the English accent.

The minder who had driven the car wagged a thumb in Bolan's direction.

"There was some aggravation. Willi came off worse," he explained in his heavily accented English. "He's never learned to keep his mouth closed. He's in the car."

The blond Brit leaned forward a little, stroking the tip of his narrow chin.

“I was surprised when you contacted Bickell. Obviously the example of your dead friends failed as the deterrent it was intended to be.”

“Did you expect us to ignore it?” Bolan said.

“Had it not occurred to your superiors that Bickell might have been the one who turned on your friends?” The man adjusted the hang of his jacket.

“We guessed. It was decided to draw him out. Give him a chance to repent his misdeeds.”

“A sense of humor. I like that in a man. But it isn’t going to save you.”

“I wasn’t expecting it to. I just wanted to get a look at the kind of people who would kill so readily.”

“Look, Cooper...is that correct? *Cooper*? Turner and Bentley, or whatever their real names, were dealt with as part of a tactical maneuver.” He smiled. “Sounds bloody pretentious, doesn’t it? But they were getting a little too close to us at a busy time. Couldn’t afford to have them snooping around like that.”

Bolan stayed silent, watching the man. He was playing it light, but there was intelligence in those eyes.

“You can’t avoid it,” Bolan said. “Sooner or later your organization is going to come down. Killing Turner and Bentley shows you’re getting scared because the investigation is closing in.”

The Brit smiled. Not from bravado. It was clearly from the security that he felt.

“It will never happen, Cooper. Turner and Bentley were blundering around like a pair of blind men. They had no idea what they were taking on. Just like your bloody task force.” He held up a single finger. “You can’t touch us. Understand. You cannot touch us. Keep sending your sad little agents and we will get rid of them just like Turner and Bentley. And you, *Cooper*.”

He turned aside to speak to Bickell’s heavies. The conversation was brief, words muffled. Then he glanced back at Bolan.

“Now?” asked the man who had driven the car.

“Yes. We get rid of him. No time to play games this time. Just kill him and dispose of the body.” The Brit barely glanced at Bolan as he made for the door. “Your trip here was a waste of time. Pity you won’t even get to see the sights.”

As he passed through the office door the driver attracted his attention.

“What about Bickell, Mr. Chambers? He *is* becoming a liability. Since we dealt with those Americans he’s become nervous. Scared. He could break. We don’t think he should be trusted any longer.”

Chambers stopped in his tracks, turning to face the driver. His pale face showed twin red blotches on his cheeks.

“What are my orders about using my name? Tell me.”

“Never to mention it. I apologize for my error, sir.”

The Brit glanced across at Bolan.

The big American shrugged.

“I’m not going to be telling anyone. Am I, Mr. Chambers?”

A thin smile curled Chambers’s lips.

“Very true, Cooper. Very true.” He turned to the driver. “Make sure they are *both* taken care of. We can’t afford any more of Bickell’s nerves.”

Chambers stepped out of the office.

The driver perched on the edge of the office desk. His partner moved for the first time since they had entered the office. “Willi?” he asked.

“Bring him in here. Give Chambers a minute to get clear. You know he prefers not to be around at times like these,” the driver said.

“He has no stomach.”

“It’s what we are paid for.”

As the partner left the office Bolan glanced at the driver. “Is the English for my benefit?” he asked.

The driver grinned, seeming to enjoy the question. “Rotterdam can be a very hospitable city. But not exactly so in your case.”

“And there I was hoping you might show me around.”

The sound of a car engine rose as Chambers drove away, the noise fading quickly. Bolan heard the scrape of shoe leather on the concrete outside the office. The door was pushed open to admit Bickell and the driver’s partner. The lower part of Bickell’s face was swollen and bloody. The moment he saw Bolan he erupted into a wild verbal assault.

The driver yelled at him. Bickell ignored him, still screaming. Without warning he launched himself at Bolan, arms flailing wildly.

The driver’s partner reached out to grab Bickell. He had both hands free, having put his pistol away.

Bolan allowed Bickell to get within a foot or so, then launched himself into action. He caught hold of Bickell’s coat, swinging the man off balance, and used him as a battering ram against the driver. Bolan’s contained energy

lifted Bickell off his feet and he was catapulted into the driver. Locked briefly together the pair tumbled back over the desk, sliding across the smooth surface and over the far edge.

The moment he released Bickell, Bolan swung about and met the driver's partner head-on. Before the man could put up any defense Bolan slammed into him, hitting him in the face with a crippling elbow smash. The man grunted, stunned, briefly stalled, blood gushing from his crushed nose. Bolan hit him again, then caught his shoulders and spun the man around, wrapping his arms around the man's neck. Bolan applied pressure, twisting, until he heard the crunch of crushed vertebrae. He felt the man shudder, body going into spasm, before it became dead weight. Bolan's right hand moved down and located the pistol in the deep pocket of the man's coat. He reached in and hauled the heavy automatic pistol clear. It was a SIG-Sauer P-226. The Executioner knew the weapon well. As he swung the gun up, turning, he let the dead man slip from his grasp. The weapon's muzzle lined up on the desk as the driver struggled upright, head and shoulders coming into view. Bolan's fingers stroked the trigger and released a trio of fast shots into the driver. The slugs cored in through the target's chest. The driver fell back and slammed against the wall, a stunned expression on his face.

As the driver slid sideways, blood smearing the wall, Bickell lurched upright, hands grabbing for the pistol still in the dead man's hand. He snatched it free and turned the muzzle toward Bolan, his finger jerking back on the trigger in a moment of frantic zeal.

The bullet hit the wall behind Bolan. The Executioner returned fire, his double shot blowing through Bickell's upper body and dumping him on the floor. Bickell hunched up in fetal curl.

"Not the way I wanted this to end," Bolan muttered.

3

The Executioner moved from body to body, checking pockets and placing the contents on the desk. He had three handguns and extra magazines. He took a cell phone from Bickell and one from the driver. Wallets offered banknotes and credit cards. The only one with identification was the driver. It gave his name as Rik Vandergelt. Bolan kept that. He also took the banknotes. Cash money was always useful. He pocketed the cell phones.

The Executioner searched the office. He wasn't expecting hard evidence to directly point the finger at the trafficking business. He was just hoping to find something to work with. The desk yielded little of interest. He moved on to the battered wooden filing cabinets standing against one wall. The first held not much more than office stationary. The second had three drawers. Two were empty. The top one had a couple of folders stuffed with invoices. They were all from a company in the U.K. The company, South East Containers, was based near a coastal town that served as a conduit for the container business with Europe. The invoices were dated as far back as a couple of years. Bolan was about to leave the invoices when his attention was caught by the name of the company's director, printed in a small box at the top of the invoice.

In itself the name wouldn't mean very much. A legitimate-sounding company. Legitimate-sounding director.

Except that he had just ordered Mack Bolan's death before walking out of the office.

The director was Paul Chambers.

Bolan folded one of the invoices and slid it into a pocket. As he placed the stack of papers back in the drawer a pale cream envelope he hadn't noticed slipped from the documents. He picked it up and took a look at the address. It was to the same one that the invoices had been sent. The postmark showed it was at least three months old and mailed from Amsterdam. The envelope held a single sheet of good-quality notepaper. The same color as the envelope, the paper was heavy and embossed. The

heading showed it was from a law firm in Rotterdam. The brief text in a smart font was in Dutch. One line indicated a time and date a week earlier. Bolan stared at the note, his eyes checking out the printed name at the bottom of the text.

Ludwig van Ryden. The lawyer Brognola's information had named. Small beginnings.

Bolan had long ago learned never to ignore any lead, no matter the initial insignificance. The letter went into his pocket next to the invoice.

Bolan took the SIG-Sauer and the extra magazines. Leaving the office he crossed to the car that had transported him to the warehouse. He made a quick search that netted him nothing. The car was clean. He debated whether to use the vehicle, making a quick decision to leave it where it was. The car might be fitted with a manufacturer's tracking chip, allowing the opposition pick him up once they realized the vehicle was missing. Bolan decided he would be better off hiring a vehicle himself.

He walked away. It was still raining, the morning overcast. The weather was the least of his concerns. It took him twenty minutes to retrace the route the car had taken. Back on a main thoroughfare he managed to catch a passing cab and asked to be returned to his hotel. Back in his room he stripped off his damp clothing and took a hot shower. Clad in a thick bathrobe he rang room service and ordered a pot of coffee. It arrived quickly and Bolan filled a cup. He had the company invoice and the letter from the man called van Ryden in front of him. He took the pair of cell phones and switched them on. Bickell's phone listed more than two dozen incoming calls, the majority from the same number. Vandergelt's phone showed a couple of calls from the same number. The number matched the one on van Ryden's letterhead.

Bolan activated his phone and called Brognola. His friend's voice was slurry from sleep when he answered. "You get a kick waking me up?"

"Hal, if you insist on going to bed every night, what can I do?"

The big Fed laughed. Bolan heard him moving around before he spoke again.

"How did the meeting with Bickell go?"

"Interesting. You can scratch him off the list. He *was* the one who drew your mans into a trap. Had me walk into a setup with a couple of his Dutch buddies. We went to a rendezvous with a Brit named Chambers. He wasn't

too happy with me. Seems your task force was getting close to Venturer Exports. So the hit on your mans was ordered.”

“You mentioned Bickell in the past tense.”

“After Chambers ordered his local heavies to feed me to the fishes matters got a little heated. Venturer Exports is down three employees.”

“Understood. Did you gain any intel?”

“Couple of things. I want you to check into a U.K. company called South East Containers. Director is Paul Chambers. Has to be the same one who wanted me dead. I also found a connection with your lawyer Ludwig van Ryden. Another name for you—Rik Vandergelt. He was one of Chambers’s enforcers. See if there’s anything on the database.”

“Okay. I’ll get right on to it. Striker, you need anything else?”

“Right now, no.”

“Expect a call,” Brognola said.

“I may be on the move.”

“No surprise there.”

BOLAN DRESSED in one of the suits he had brought with him. He tucked the SIG-Sauer in his belt and buttoned his jacket. From a leather case he took a couple of printed business cards Brognola had provided. They showed Bolan as an executive from a computer software company based in Maryland. It was a fictitious company located at a nonexistent address. The telephone and e-mail contacts would route any caller to an automatic response that would accept the call and promise a return response. Bolan placed the cards in his wallet. He called the front desk and asked for a cab to take him to the *Hofpoort* district of the city. It was in the business center of Rotterdam. Ludwig van Ryden’s office was located there.

Bolan dropped his damp clothes into a plastic bag and took them down with him, asking for them to be cleaned and pressed. His cab was already waiting when he emerged from the hotel. The weather had brightened, the rain had stopped. The Executioner settled back for the journey, planning ahead for his anticipated rendezvous with Ludwig van Ryden.

THE OFFICE BLOCK was one of a number in the neat plaza. The notice board outside told him van Ryden occupied a suite on the sixth floor. Bolan made

his way toward the entrance, pausing briefly to switch off his phone. Brognola had called during the cab ride to inform him that Ludwig van Ryden was one of the key names on the task-force database. His association with individuals within the trafficking business was known to the force, but they had nothing they could move on with certainty. The man was sharp. His reputation as a lawyer who worked very closely with human rights groups made it difficult to nail. The slightest hint of any possible move against him brought instant and vociferous agitation from influential members of the Dutch establishment. The big Fed provided information that van Ryden had made a number of visits to the U.K. where he had meetings with Paul Chambers and Hugo Canfield.

“Rik Vandergelt is known to Interpol. He served a couple of prison terms a few years back. Since his last incarceration he’s managed to stay out of jail. Seems he got himself a hotshot lawyer. Name of van Ryden.”

“Keeping it in the family,” Bolan said.

The Executioner stepped through the glass doors of the office block, hearing them swish shut behind him. He crossed the art-deco lobby and smiled pleasantly at the young woman behind the expansive reception desk.

“Do I need to sign in?” he asked, placing his hands on the marble-topped counter. “My first visit to Rotterdam. I guess I’m still finding my way around.”

The receptionist observed the tall, good-looking man, noting the intense blue eyes and the genuine smile. His voice was deep and a little unsettling. His steady gaze, appreciating her blond beauty, took her by surprise. She was not accustomed to such intimate scrutiny. The sensation was not unpleasant.

“Have you an appointment with anyone?”

Bolan shook his head. He took out one of his business cards and slid it across the counter for the young woman to read.

“I only got in last night. Haven’t had the chance to make formal arrangements yet. Would have done it this morning but my meetings went on longer than I expected. Next thing I received a call from my CEO to catch the evening flight to Paris, but to call in and say hello to Mr. van Ryden. We’re hoping to meet up with him soon to negotiate some long-term representation with our company.” He increased his smile. “Help, please.”

She returned his smile and picked up her phone, tapping in a number. When it was answered she spoke quietly, her eyes never once leaving

Bolan's face. When she was finished she replaced the receiver.

"Mr. van Ryden will see you immediately," she said. "He has a meeting in half an hour but says he can spare some time." She directed Bolan to the bank of elevators across the lobby. "Sixth floor. Suite thirty-two."

"If I wasn't leaving in a few hours I would invite you out for dinner."

"If you were not going away I would accept."

"Maybe next time."

"Yes. Maybe next time." She watched him walk to the elevator, giving a sigh before she returned to her duties.

Definitely next time.

BOLAN STEPPED OUT of the elevator, checking the wallboard for directions. Suite thirty-two was to his left. He pushed open the pale wood door and stepped inside. An outer office contained a desk and another attractive young woman. The Dutch seemed to have got it right, Bolan decided.

"Mr. Connor?" the woman asked, pushing to her feet. She was strikingly tall. She guided him to double doors and knocked, pushing open one of the doors to let him enter. It closed firmly behind Bolan.

Ludwig van Ryden's office was wide, spacious, furnished expensively. The man's desk looked large enough to host a dinner party. There was an open laptop computer in the center. The office was a mix of pale wood, glass, stainless steel. Hidden lights illuminated a collection of slender glass sculptures housed in wall cabinets. A half-open door showed a private washroom. Underfoot the carpet was thick and soft.

The lawyer rose from behind his desk to meet Bolan. He was in his forties. A tall, leanly fit man wearing a suit that had probably cost a small fortune. His thick brown hair fell to the collar of his jacket. He came around the desk to take Bolan's hand, his smile showing even white teeth.

"Please sit down, Mr. Connor. Would you like a drink?"

"Thanks, no." Bolan sat in one of the cream leather chairs, watching van Ryden fill a heavy tumbler with whiskey. "You might want to make that a double, van Ryden," he said quietly.

The lawyer half turned, an amused smile on his lips. Then he saw the pistol Bolan was pointing in his direction. For a moment he froze, glass in his hand.

"I don't understand. What is this?"

"*This* is a gun. Taken earlier from a friend of yours. Rik Vandergelt." Bolan saw the color drain from van Ryden's face. The name had meant something to him. "I see I have your attention now."

"I do not know what you mean. The name means nothing to me."

"Right. So you've forgotten that you represented him legally? I'm sure he could have done with your advice a couple of hours ago. Then we have Paul Chambers. And Wilhelm Bickell. I don't suppose you know them, either?"

"Of course not."

"So you'll be even more surprised if I tell you my name isn't Connor. It's Cooper."

The lawyer flinched at the mention of the name. He recovered enough to move the whiskey glass, raising it to his lips and swallowing the liquid in a single gulp. Bolan saw it as a simple ploy to allow van Ryden time to gather himself. When the man returned his gaze to Bolan he had composed himself.

"We could spend the next hour playing word games," van Ryden said. "But that would be a waste of your time and mine, *Mr. Cooper*. So, what is it you want?"

"American agents Turner and Bentley were both murdered by your associates. Bickell arranged for the same to happen to me. It didn't happen as planned. Bickell is dead. So is Vandergelt," the Executioner said.

"If I knew these people, what am I supposed to understand from what you have told me?"

"It's simple enough. You and your associates are involved up to your necks in human trafficking. I'm here to serve notice. Nothing fancy wrapped up in legal terms. Time is up for all of you. I'm going to close you down. All the way. Mark it in your diary, van Ryden."

The lawyer took a moment to absorb Bolan's words. He looked like a man who couldn't decide whether he had heard the truth, or been fed a line. He ran a hand across his mouth, then wagged a finger in Bolan's direction.

"A joke. This is a bad joke. *Ja?*"

"Call your associate Chambers. Ask him about Cooper. We were face-to-face this morning. Maybe he'll see the funny side. And don't waste time denying any involvement with Chambers. It's on record you've had meetings with him in the U.K. And with Hugo Canfield."

The lawyer sobered up suddenly, accepting that the stranger in his office was deadly serious. He glanced at the black muzzle of the pistol. At Bolan's unflinching gaze. He realized he was in a risky position. He became a lawyer again, relying on his bargaining skills.

"You have virtually admitted killing Bickell and Vandergelt. You're an American in a foreign country. You represent the U.S. government. How do you think the Dutch police will view this? Add the fact you have walked into my office and threatened me with a gun?"

"I'm sure you're going to make it clear for me."

"Cooper, you cannot win. Everything is against you. So I admit I am working with Chambers. There are others. Far too powerful for you to influence. I am a respected member of the community. Who do think they will side with? *You*? I do not think so."

"Let me think about that. In the meantime I need to make sure you don't raise the alarm when I leave." Bolan pressed the muzzle of the pistol against van Ryden's forehead. "Take off your belt," he ordered.

"Why?"

Bolan waggled the pistol. "Humor me. I'm an American in a strange town and it's been difficult to say the least. So I'm allowed to act oddly. Now do it."

The lawyer did as he was told. Bolan made him face the desk, hands behind his back. He used the thin belt to strap the lawyer's wrists together, tightly. Pushing the man around the desk Bolan shoved him into his chair. He yanked out the telephone cable and circled van Ryden's neck, drawing it around the seat's headrest. Bolan pulled it tight enough to be uncomfortable.

"Don't struggle against it. The knot I've tied will pull tighter if you put pressure on it," the Executioner said.

Bolan was lying but van Ryden didn't know that. His face was shiny with sweat and his eyes showed real fear.

The big American crossed the office and stepped into the well-appointed washroom, grabbing a couple of towels. He used one to blindfold van Ryden. The other he partially stuffed into van Ryden's mouth, muffling any sound the man might make. Bolan spun the leather seat and pushed it away from the desk, leaving it facing the window.

Bolan checked the open laptop on the desk. The lawyer had been composing an e-mail. It was addressed to Paul Chambers. In English. It was

advising the arrival of cargo that night at a place called *Noosen Hag* and told Chambers that distribution would take place within a few days. He was to expect his consignment then. Bolan memorized the location details. He would follow it up after he left van Ryden's office.

Unsure what was happening van Ryden began to use his feet to turn his chair around. Bolan waited, then moved in close, bending to whisper in the man's ear.

"I said don't move. Try that again and I'll tighten that cord around your neck myself."

Bolan rolled the chair across the office and into the washroom. He flicked off the light and closed the door on van Ryden.

Bolan let himself out of the main office, pausing to say goodbye to van Ryden for the benefit of his secretary. He closed the door, turning to smile at the young woman.

"Mr. van Ryden said to tell you he's making a private call and doesn't want to be disturbed. He'll call when he's done."

The secretary nodded. "Thank you."

Bolan stepped into the corridor and made for the elevator. On the ground floor he walked calmly out of the building, raising a hand to the girl he'd spoken to earlier. Outside he walked along the street until he was around the corner from the building before he hailed a cab to take him back to his hotel and a call he needed to make to Washington.

4

Bolan's call to Brognola had resulted in the man coming back to him with details on the location. The big Fed had gone into the task-force database and it had provided Bolan with enough intel to hire a vehicle and drive along the coast to the isolated promontory where *Noosen Hag*, the former oil storage depot, stood. Brognola's check had revealed that the depot, closed down for three years, had been leased through a shell company fronting for a consortium proposing to regenerate the site. It turned out that the consortium had connections with businessmen allied, through shadowy links to South East Containers, in turn tied to Venturer Exports. The various connections were all carefully concealed by setups and financial maneuvering in attempts to hide who was really at the helm. But as Brognola had pointed out *all roads led to Rome*. In this instance Hugo Canfield's name kept popping up. Distanced from the everyday workings of the multilayered companies, his presence kept revealing itself. Still vague enough to prevent any interference by the legally bound task force, leaving them looking on, unable to act against him. Brognola offered the information to his loose cannon, knowing full well that Bolan would act on it.

The defunct oil refinery was having a busy night. From his vantage point Bolan could see a number of parked vehicles. Panel vans. Private cars. There was some activity on the concrete jetty built to serve vessels belonging to the oil company. Powerful spotlights, powered by a portable generator, illuminated the area.

Bolan had made his way to the site in the Toyota SUV he had rented earlier in the day. He'd covered the twenty-five miles in ample time and parked at a safe distance to go in on foot for the final distance. Crouching in shadow behind a scrap heap of rusting steel edging the jetty, only yards from the activity, Bolan watched as a crane hoisted a large steel container onto the trailer of a low-loader rig. He had watched the container being off-loaded from the small container ship that was now making its way back out

to sea after delivering the container to the waiting handling crew. The turnaround time had been fast. No delays. The container ship would be back on its original course within a half hour.

He had counted six in the crew on the jetty. Only two were showing weapons—H&K MP-5s. That didn't mean the rest were unarmed. Bolan had the SIG-Sauer P-226. It held a full 15-round magazine and he had three more as backup. Unless he could pick up additional weaponry the pistol was going to have to earn its keep. Time was against Bolan, as well. It wouldn't be long before the container was opened and its cargo released. That was a relative term. The people inside the container would simply be exchanging one form of captivity for another. Steel container to panel truck. Not a great exchange, thinking ahead to where the unfortunate passengers might finally end up.

Someone on the jetty crew started to call out orders. Bolan saw figures move to the front of the container and begin to unseal the doors.

As the container doors swung open, the gunmen standing guard, one of the crew hauled himself into the opening. From where he crouched Bolan could hear his barked orders. Moments later shuffling figures appeared at the opening of the container. They reacted when they saw the weapons aimed at them, but there was nowhere for them to go. One by one they began to drop to the ground, huddling together out of instinct. Bolan saw mostly women and young girls. When one held back she was pushed forward, stumbling to her knees. The muzzle of a submachine gun was jammed into her spine. The gunman took hold of the girl's long dark hair and dragged her to her feet. He was yelling at her as he slapped her across the face. He raised his weapon and took aim.

He didn't get a chance to fire. Bolan tracked in with his weapon and put a single shot through the back of the man's skull. The gunman pitched forward onto his face, blood pooling around him.

The jetty crew panicked. The Executioner took advantage of the chaos. He targeted the men wielding weapons, the SIG-Sauer cracking steadily. The men carrying the guns were down on the jetty before they were able to pinpoint the hidden shooter. Bolan changed position, moving around the scrap metal and emerging near the container. He met one of the remaining three crewmen face-on. The man was dragging a pistol from beneath his jacket when Bolan slammed the SIG-Sauer across the side of the man's

skull. The man grunted, stumbling, and Bolan helped him down with a bone-crunching second blow. The man hit the jetty facedown.

The Executioner crouched briefly to take charge of the man's pistol. He heard someone yelling in English. He ducked around the end of the container where the captives were scattering along the jetty. He caught a glimpse of others still inside the container, shrinking back from the chaos outside. The crewman who had climbed inside the container was still there. He had a gun in his hand as he leaned cautiously from the opening. He failed to see Bolan until it was too late. The SIG-Sauer cracked, driving two 9 mm slugs into the man's torso. He tumbled from the container onto the hard concrete. His skull bounced against the jetty.

As Bolan checked the far side of the container he saw the sixth man making a run for the parked cars. Bolan hit him with a few 9 mm slugs to the legs, taking him down in an uncoordinated sprawl.

"Anyone speak English?" Bolan asked the women in the container. Two of the young woman acknowledged his question.

"Get them to calm down. Tell them they are going to be freed."

Bolan walked to where the leg-shot man lay. The man had rolled onto his back, sitting up and staring at his shattered limbs. Bolan kept his pistol in clear sight as he approached the man. He spotted the man's dropped weapon and kicked it across the jetty and into the water.

"Must hurt like hell," Bolan said.

The man swore in English, his brittle British accent exaggerated by the pain from his wounds. He dragged himself to the container trailer and pushed his back against one of the rear wheels.

"I'll bet you're the bastard who took down Bickell and his minders. Right, am I? They told us to watch out in case you showed."

"Lucky for me you didn't pay too much attention," the Executioner said.

"Fuck you, Yank. My legs hurt, you bleeder."

"Can't you see the tears in my eyes?"

"What are you going to do to him?" A woman's voice came from behind Bolan.

He turned. It was the young woman he had spoken to. Her gaze was fixed on the wounded crewman. There was no pity in her eyes as she stared down at him. She was attractive, but right then her face was a hardened mask of sharp angles, pale and bloodless.

“What does he deserve?” Bolan asked.

She turned her gaze on Bolan, searching his face, seeing someone who would treat her respectfully. Despite her drawn, pale features the Executioner could see she was a determined young woman. He glanced beyond her to the rest of the “cargo” from the container. They were all exhibiting the ravages of their ordeal but they were far from being defeated.

“He deserves the worst we could do to him,” the young woman said. Her soft voice bore traces of an Eastern European accent. “But if we did that, then we become as bad as they are.”

The crewman glanced at her, unsure how to take the remark. He had the sense to stay silent, concentrating on his wounds.

Bolan drew the woman aside, looking over her shoulder so he could keep the wounded Brit in sight. “What do I call you?”

“Lucky?” She reached out to touch his arm, a simple gesture that expressed her feelings. “My mother was always telling me my humor would get me into trouble. My name is Majira.”

“Where did they pick you all from?”

“Pristina. Off the streets. My own fault for walking home alone after dark. But what was I supposed to do? Never go out? Lose my job? I had heard about the traffickers. How they grab people and send them abroad. I never imagined I would be one of their victims. Nor would any of the others.” She took a breath, her voice breaking slightly. “It is the children who would suffer worst. We all understand what would happen to them. Sold to...to soulless monsters who would abuse them.”

“Not his time, Majira.”

“You are American. Why are you doing this?”

“Long story. Let’s say I’m trying to shut this group down.”

“Are you a policeman? One of the good mans?”

Bolan nodded. “I’ll go with that. The name is Cooper, by the way.”

“So, Cooper, tell me, what happens now?”

Bolan looked at the huddled figures. He turned, checking out the darkened buildings at the landward end of the jetty.

“Take everyone to those buildings. At least you’ll have shelter while I organize things. Do it now, Majira.”

She nodded, turned quickly and spoke to the group. Her voice persuaded them to follow her. Bolan watched the uneven line moving away, the older women comforting the children. He waited until they had

vanished inside one of the buildings before turning his attention to his captive.

“What’s bloody well going on?” the Brit asked.

“I feel more comfortable without witnesses,” Bolan said, standing over the downed man and staring at him.

The Brit watched him, short-lived defiance showing through his pain. He wasn’t sure how to perceive the tall, black-clad American. One thing he did know. The man was serious. The way he had taken down the crew had been an eye-opener. Once he had his opening he had taken out the opposition with ruthless efficiency. Being the sole survivor might not turn out to be the greatest blessing.

“What?” the Brit asked. “Christ, if you’re going to kill me get on with it. Standing there saying nothing. It’s creepy.” His remark was said more out of bravado than anything else. In truth he was scared.

“Tell me about the two Americans you killed.”

“Now you wait a minute. I had nothing to do with that. It was down to Willi Bickell and the blokes who run things. No shit, mate, they did it. I’m just hired help.”

Loyalty never flew the coop so fast, Bolan thought.

“Chambers is the head man around here?”

A frantic nod. The Brit looked eager to talk, hopeful it would go toward extending his life span. The man was no different to anyone else. His first thoughts were of his own survival.

Bolan made a show of ejecting the pistol’s magazine and snapping in a fresh one. He dropped the ejected mag into his pocket, moving round the prone man on the ground.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Bolan glanced at the man. “I can’t afford loose ends.”

“You can’t. You people don’t go round executing people.”

“People like me?” Bolan said.

“You’re a cop. And bloody cops don’t—”

“I think we need to clear something up. I never said I was a cop. I don’t have a rule book.”

“Look, fuck this game. You can’t just shoot me like this.”

“No?”

“Can we deal?” the man pleaded.

“Maybe you don’t have anything I want.”

“Try me. But we make a deal first or I don’t say a thing.”

“My word good enough?”

“I have to trust you? Big risk for me.”

“You’re still alive.”

The Brit considered his situation. He wasn’t going to get a written guarantee, and he was in no shape to play hard to get.

“So what do you need to know?”

“Tell me about van Ryden?”

“He fixes things. Has connections here. Arranges for people to look the other way so we can get cargo in and out. He works with the top level in the U.K., as well. Yeah, well, Chambers does the hiring and firing here and at the U.K. base, but Hugo Canfield is the real man in charge. Chambers is second fiddle, really. He likes to throw his weight about. Canfield is the man. But you wouldn’t want to tangle with him. He’s too big. Can’t be interfered with. The man has a cop in his pocket. An Interpol agent. Probably even customs officers. Hell, maybe even higher than that. He runs in serious circles. No shit, mate, Canfield is bad news. I’d sooner sit naked in a crate of fuckin’ rattlesnakes than cross Canfield.”

“What about a database? Names and locations?”

“Even if I told you, there isn’t anything you can do.”

“So what have you got to lose?”

“Only my balls. If they find out I gave them up what they did to your undercover men will be like a slap on the wrist.”

“One way or another you’re going to tell me. I can walk away and let you bleed to death, or end it with a bullet behind the ear. Believe me when I say I don’t give a damn one way or another. It’s your choice. Your buddies took the hard way. That can be arranged for you.”

“What about protection? I’ve cooperated. You can get me protection.”

Bolan took out his cell phone.

“I can make the call from right here if you give me what I need.”

“I did hear van Ryden has a database on his computer. It’s supposed to have details on everyone who works for Venturer. Means they can keep tabs on us all. Hold on to all our unsavory little secrets. Keeps it at his home outside the city. Place is watched over by armed security. Only other thing I can tell you about is the farm they use to house people while trade is done. I can give you a location for both places.”

Bolan made his call minutes later. When Brognola came on Bolan briefed him on the status of the mission.

“If the task force wasn’t wrapped up in protocols and red tape, maybe they could have gotten further,” Brognola grumbled. “So tell me again about these people you found.”

“Women and children. One I spoke to said she was snatched in Pristina so I’m guessing this group came from that area. Off-loaded from a container ship. I arrived in time to prevent them being moved off the dock and sent to God knows where. Hal, do you still have people on the ground hereabouts?”

“Part of the task force is cooling their heels in Amsterdam. You need their help?”

“The women and kids need looking after. Somewhere they’ll be secure until a decision can be made about them. I also have a survivor from the crew who were going to ship them out. He’s wounded. Needs medical assistance and protection. Your task force might be able to get more info out of him.”

“I expect you’ve already got what you need?”

“We exchanged mutual considerations.”

“I’m sure. Striker, let me talk to our people out there. I’ll come back to you ASAP.”

Bolan spent time collecting weapons from the dead crewmen. He placed his small arsenal just inside the open container. He kept one of the MP-5s and extra magazines for his own use. He checked out the cab of the big tractor-trailer unit and located a first-aid box under the passenger seat. Using the contents he bound up the Brit’s legs, applying pressure pads to slow any further blood loss.

“First you shoot me, now you bandage me up. What next? A mug of hot sweet tea?”

“What do you think?”

“Sounds like I’m a dead man either way.”

“Redemption can go a long way to keeping you alive.”

“Meaning what exactly?”

“You gave me what I needed. So I’ll keep my word. You’ll be taken into protective custody.”

“Don’t I have a say about all this?”

The hardness that etched itself across the big American's face told the man he had said the wrong thing. The blue eyes were suddenly like chips of ice. He could almost feel the chill emanating from them.

"I'd be justified to shoot you right now after what I've seen tonight. You people are crawling in the gutter. You sleep well at night? Seeing those young kids and knowing the life you're sending them to? Have you looked at pictures showing how those perverts treat them?"

"Look, I just work on this part of the business. Collection and distribution. Never seen where they go."

"That clear your conscience?"

"Mate, I've been struggling for years to do that. Probably too late for me. I'm just trying to earn a living. Bloody hell, aren't we all?"

Bolan didn't answer. He had all too often heard the excuses, the self-justification, the criminal element came up with to whitewash their activities. He didn't believe a word of it. He dismissed it as he always did, because if he digested it and analyzed the pathetic reasons he might have turned his gun on them out of sheer disgust.

Reasoning platitudes were the get-out clauses from the mouths of criminals through the decades. From mass murderers to raving dictators who slaughtered thousands, there was always an excuse. A smiling word that was supposed to wash away the bloodlust and the wanton elimination of entire cultures. The perpetrators never considered they had done anything wrong. It was always the rest of the world that was out of step. That did not understand why a particular horror had been committed. Some odd quirk lodged deep in the homicidal, deranged minds of the despots allowed them to excuse away what they had done. If they explained it they self-purged their conscience. They became heroes instead of maniacal villains. And in many instances they often convinced others to see the justification.

In Mack Bolan's eyes a bloody-handed butcher was just that. There was no redemption. No vainglorious explanation that wiped away the needless deaths of men, women and children. Evil was evil. It would never be reconciled as far as he was concerned. It was why the Executioner existed. Why he stood against the monsters.

Someone had to.

Because if he didn't, who would?

5

Hugo Canfield was having lunch at his London club when the maître d'brought him the telephone. He plugged it into one of the sockets, then placed the instrument on the table for Canfield.

"The caller said it was quite urgent, Mr. Canfield."

Canfield nodded. "Thank you, Enright." He waited until the man had withdrawn before picking up the receiver.

"Canfield."

"This is van Ryden. Is it convenient?"

Canfield allowed himself a slight smile. The club dining room was exceptionally quiet. Only two other diners were seated together on the far side of the opulent room. All Canfield could hear was the low murmur of their voices and the click of knives and forks as they ate.

"It will cease to be if my roast beef gets cold."

"There has been a problem with the latest cargo due for delivery. I thought you should know."

"Explain 'problem,' Ludwig."

There was a slight pause before van Ryden spoke. "The problem occurred at the delivery location and the cargo was lost."

"I'll be going back to my office after lunch. Use the jet. I want you in London before the end of the day."

"Of course, Hugo."

Canfield ended the call. He beckoned for Enright to remove the phone, then returned to his meal. He found his appetite a little soured at the news. Hugo Canfield did not enjoy being told that one of his shipments had been lost. He knew the details of the particular cargo that had been expected in Rotterdam. He had invested time and money, as he always did, and if it had been lost, then that meant he was going to be down a considerable sum. Not only that but he was going to have to disappoint important clients. They would not be pleased, which meant Canfield would not be pleased. Client satisfaction was something he prided himself on. It was one of the reasons

his organization was the best. He allowed no slackening in standards. He would not tolerate failure.

He smiled suddenly at the thought of van Ryden sitting in the comfort of the Learjet as it crossed from Rotterdam to London. The man would not enjoy the flight. His churning stomach would not be put down to air sickness. He would be worrying. He would not realize that Canfield was not about to lay the blame on him. The lawyer was responsible for the legal part of the operation and logistics. He also dealt with finance. He was not a field operative.

Let the man worry, Canfield decided. It would not do him any harm. It paid to keep his people on their toes, to shoulder their responsibilities.

Canfield finished his meal, called for his car to be brought to the entrance and strolled to the reception desk where he collected his coat and hat. He made an imposing figure. Just over six feet tall, athletically built—he kept himself fit—and expensively dressed. Women found him excitingly attractive and he played on that. His aloof demeanor toward those he considered below him made others step back when confronted. He *was* powerful. He exercised immense control and had no hesitation when it came to using his influence.

When he stepped outside, shielded from the London rain by the doorman's umbrella, his year-old, top-of-the-range Bentley was already at the curb. The doorman opened the rear door and Canfield slid onto the soft leather seat.

"Back to the office, sir?" asked Gantley, his driver and minder. Gantley was a former British Army military policeman. A big man. Solid and tough. Above his hard face he wore his hair close-cropped. He had worked for Canfield for eight years, was loyal and had a fearsome reputation for brutal violence. "Bloody day, sir. Global warming obviously hasn't reached London yet."

"Always the pessimist, Sergeant Gantley."

"That's me, sir. So, the office?"

"The office. No rush now. Mr. van Ryden is flying in from Rotterdam so there's plenty of time."

"Way the traffic's building up he'll more than likely be there before us."

LUDWIG VAN RYDEN WAS shown into Canfield's spacious Canary Wharf office just before five o'clock. Watching from behind his executive desk Canfield was barely able to refrain from smiling at the concern on van Ryden's face.

"Sit down, Ludwig." Canfield caught the attention of his secretary, who had shown the Dutchman in. "Jane, please arrange some fresh coffee for us. Or would you like something stronger, Ludwig?"

"Coffee will be fine."

As the door closed behind the young woman, Canfield pushed to his feet and stood at the wide window that overlooked Canary Wharf. He never failed to enjoy the view. It excited him.

This was *his* pinnacle.

It had taken him a long time to build his organization—taking it from humble beginnings all the way to an empire that spanned the globe. On his way to the top Canfield had honed his skills on the backs of others. Weaker men failed to spot the quiet ambition of the younger man in their employ. Canfield had been a good pupil. Always watching and listening, gathering his strength by exploiting others. When he was ready he struck.

During his climb to absolute power he left behind a trail of dead bodies. Literally. But Canfield always covered his tracks. There were rumors about the way he worked, but Canfield was sharp enough never to leave evidence that might point the finger his way. Each time he took out rivals he absorbed the operations they had been running, slowly and carefully creating his own. Now he controlled a powerful criminal network that had its hand in a number of illegal operations, the most lucrative was his human trafficking.

It had not taken Canfield long to realize the potential of the trade in people. From the very young to adults, the slave business was thriving.

The suite of offices at Canary Wharf, the prestigious docklands business complex, housed Canfield Enterprises. Day to day it carried on the legitimate side of the business. Finance and development. It acted as a cover for Canfield's murkier business dealings. The majority of the people working there knew nothing of Canfield's other enterprises. The legitimate business earned him a lot of money and contacts he made from that part of his empire were icing on the cake.

His illicit enterprise had recently brought Canfield's organization under the close scrutiny of a multination task force. The goal of the task force was

to gather enough evidence to allow the law to close him down. That was the plain and simple fact. The intent was there but the task force, though it had its suspicions, was unable to garner the hard evidence that would lead to Canfield's conviction. The task force worked within the constrictions of lawful intent. They had to follow the rules. Canfield was under no such regulation. He worked by his own set of rules. There were no limits in his world of business. As long as he made his money and increased his power, then he was satisfied. He was already ultrawealthy and making more money by the day. He was a well-known businessman. He had, over the years, cultivated many relationships with respectable people in positions of power. Some of those individuals were also under his patronage because Canfield had something on them. He disliked the word *blackmail*, preferring to see the associations as a mutual understanding between friends. He protected them by keeping their guilty secrets hidden away, suggesting that reciprocating gestures from them would retain the status quo. Within his circle of friends Canfield had government ministers, cops, wealthy individuals who moved in high circles.

Hugo Canfield felt very secure in his world.

The recent events in Rotterdam, namely the disposal of the two American agents who had managed to penetrate his organization, had been a means of announcing to the task force that they were ineffective. That nothing they could do would ever touch him. It showed that he, Hugo Canfield, had the power to do such a thing without fear of reprisal. The task force knew what had happened, but there had not been a thing they could do about it. Proof positive did not exist. If they had arrested Canfield, or any of his people, it would have ended up with them all walking free because there was not the slightest shred of evidence against him. Or the people who had carried out the torture and murder. His legal team would refute any and all charges against him as being without basis. The task force would have one chance to take Canfield down and one chance only. They needed proof absolute. To the last detail. Evidence both documentary and verbal. Witnesses. They would need enough backup to fill a courtroom. The task force knew that and so did Canfield. Despite the international members of the task force they had nothing they could use against Hugo Canfield. With his contacts he would be able to buy, destroy or wipe out anything the task force threatened him with.

“Wait until the coffee arrives, then we can talk,” he said over his shoulder to van Ryden.

The lawyer was in no hurry to get to the reason he was in London. He had been debating the matter with himself during the flight in Canfield’s jet. Whenever he had flown before he had always immersed himself in the luxury of the executive aircraft. Canfield had ordered many custom additions to the airplane during its construction. It was equipped with the most comfortable seats van Ryden had ever sat in. It had a communications system that would have cast a shadow over Air Force One. Onboard entertainment played to perfection and the cabin crew were able to serve up practically anything a passenger wanted. On this particular flight van Ryden had found he couldn’t face anything except for a couple of glasses of whiskey. Even they failed to quell the queasy sensation growing stronger in his stomach the closer he got to London.

The office door opened and the young secretary wheeled in a burnished steel trolley. It held the coffee Canfield had ordered.

“Would you like me to pour, sir?” Jane asked.

“We’ll be fine,” Canfield said. “And, Jane, no interruptions until I say. No exceptions.”

She nodded and withdrew, quietly closing the double doors.

Canfield moved to the trolley and poured two cups of coffee. He handed one to van Ryden, then resumed his seat behind his desk.

“Bring me up-to-date, Ludwig. I have some details but I need clarification.”

The lawyer explained the occurrences from the meeting between Wilhelm Bickell and the American, Cooper, to the strike against the freshly delivered cargo at the former oil dock. His delivery was detailed and precise. He felt as if he was in a courtroom at that moment, though for once it felt as if he was on the witness stand himself.

Canfield listened without comment, drinking his coffee, his eyes fixed on van Ryden throughout. When the lawyer finished and took a long swallow from his own cup, Canfield waited for a few moments before he responded.

“Do we assume that it was this man, Cooper, who carried out the attack at the dock?”

“Who else would it be? He dealt with Bickell and his men. He is obviously a man who believes in direct action. As the strike at the dock

showed.”

“What do we know about this man? Apart from the obvious fact he knows his job.”

“All searches have failed to bring up anything about him. His initial contact with Bickell suggested he was involved with the task force. He isn’t on any databases I had our people check. It’s as if he doesn’t exist.”

“His actions are certainly real, Ludwig. The bullets he used killed my people, his ability to have the cargo taken into care was certainly real. I’ll have my sources look into who this bastard is. Someone, somewhere, must know about him.”

“He fooled Bickell into believing he was genuine.”

“Bickell was an incompetent idiot. He should have contacted me before he went ahead and arranged that meeting. What the bloody hell did he think he was doing? Did he imagine that every time he was confronted by someone from the task force all he had to do was kill them? The removal of Turner and Bentley was a single, clearly defined warning to the task force that they were on dangerous ground. I was not advocating open season.”

When van Ryden appeared reluctant to say any more Canfield realized he hadn’t been told the whole story. He refilled his coffee cup, sat again and asked the lawyer outright what else he had to say.

“He came to my office, Hugo,” van Ryden said. “Tricked his way in as a potential client, then made it clear his intentions are to bring us down.”

He detailed what had happened from the moment the man named Cooper had entered his office.

Canfield laughed. “If nothing else he has a bloody nerve. Whoever he is, this man doesn’t sound like your everyday task-force agent. He must be some specialist. I don’t suppose he gave anything away we could use?”

“Hugo, I was scared. He tied me up, blindfolded and gagged me and shut me in my own washroom. I’m no hero. The man terrified me. I admit that. He was serious. He proved that by the attack at the dock. For all I knew he had come to my office to kill me. And before you ask, I did not divulge any information. He already knew of my association with you.”

“Now that is interesting,” Canfield said. “The man has background details on our operation. Has information about us. What does that suggest?”

“That he does have some kind of contact with the task force.”

“They haven’t advertised their investigations to the media. Cooper must have been fed intel to get him on track.”

“But he is only one man.”

“He’s shown us that one man can do a lot of damage. He doesn’t follow any kind of rule book. Works instinctively and just goes for his targets.” Canfield sat back, considering the options open to him. “Time for some of our resources to earn their retainers. The problem with a wild card like Cooper is not knowing where he’s going to show up next.”

He reached out and tapped a button on the office intercom. “Jane, get me Paul Chambers. Tell him to drop everything and get here immediately. ASAP. Any objections just put him directly through to me. I’ll deal with him.”

“Yes, Mr. Canfield. Does that mean you’ll be staying over?”

“I won’t be going anywhere until I’ve spoken to him.”

“I’ll arrange for a meal to be delivered later. What would you prefer this evening?”

“I leave that in your capable hands, Jane. And make the meal enough for two. Mr. van Ryden will be joining me.”

“Will you need me to stay?”

“That won’t be necessary, my dear. You just make the arrangements, then you can go home as normal.”

Canfield spent the next hour discussing with van Ryden the need for damage control over the missing cargo. Client satisfaction meant a great deal to Hugo Canfield. He had a good record and the thought of that record becoming tarnished did not sit well.

“We need to arrange with Timor to gather another cargo to be ready to ship out when I give the word. I’ll have to smooth things over with our clients about the delay. I think a discounted rate should make them happy. Everybody likes a price drop.”

“I am sure *they* won’t lower the charges when they move the merchandise on.”

Canfield shrugged. “What they do with the cargo once they have bought and paid for it is their business. As long as we receive our fee I don’t give a damn.”

“What can I do to help?” van Ryden asked, eager to please his employer.

“In the morning you get back to Rotterdam. Speak to DeChambre first, then arrange for him to contact me. He’s been damned quiet since he fingered those American agents. Perhaps I’m being too soft with him. Then you go home and lay low for a few days. Relax. Stay away from your office. Keep your security crew on hand.”

“I will contact DeChambre as soon as I get back.”

“Make sure he is aware I am not happy. My God, the man is an Interpol inspector. Wouldn’t you expect him to have at least a suspicion the Americans had sent someone else over after the deaths of Turner and Bentley? Tell DeChambre I want some answers, or his monthly retainer might suddenly dry up. That should kick-start his French arse. Now, loosen your tie, Ludwig, and don’t stay so uptight.” A wide grin crossed Canfield’s face and he leaned forward to clap van Ryden on the shoulder. “God, I would have given a fortune to have seen your expression when Cooper walked into your office and poked a gun in your face.”

The lawyer still paled when he recalled the incident. He failed to see what was even faintly amusing about it. “Hugo, I think I will take that drink now, please.”

Canfield poured him a large whiskey.

“Here, get that down, then we can go over the details of this Russian drug deal. We need to work on our distribution list.”

6

Harass the enemy. If there's no opportunity to confront him in a full-on attack because he has an overwhelming force, the next best thing is to hit and run. Strike here, then fall back, move on and hit somewhere else. Keep the enemy guessing. Don't allow him to take a breath before you strike somewhere else. Take him down piece by piece.

It was a strategy the Executioner had employed many times before. He worked more often than not as a single entity without the privilege of a large supporting team behind him. His lonely war gave him no other option. Bolan had adapted to this over the years and he felt no disadvantage in having to operate without backup. On the reverse side of the card, working alone meant he could concentrate fully during an attack without having the burden of allies on his mind—no worries whether they were safe, whether they had been compromised. He only had to concentrate on himself. Responsibility came with its own shackles. When the need arose Bolan shouldered responsibility without thought, but when he was moving into a lone combat situation his mind could focus on the mission full-time.

He had liaised with Stony Man Farm. Aaron “the Bear” Kurtzman had assigned his cyber team to run a detailed check on Ludwig van Ryden's background. Especially his home. By the time Bolan was in full receipt of the information he knew enough about the lawyer's house to walk around it in the dark. He wasn't even surprised that Kurtzman had come up with detailed architect's drawing for the place.

When Bolan had staked out the property initially it quickly became evident that van Ryden was not at home. The house stood empty, no vehicle evident on the paved driveway. A call back to the Farm to run a check on van Ryden's whereabouts gave Bolan the answer to his query. An innocent telephone call to his office came back with the information that Mr. van Ryden was out of the country on business for a couple of days. So the Executioner had to wait. He did it by taking in the sights of Rotterdam he had almost missed on his arrival. He rested up for the battle to come.

When Bolan took up his surveillance again he still spent a fruitless stakeout. But on the second morning circumstances changed for the better.

The van Ryden residence stood in well-landscaped tranquility. The low-rise house was at least a quarter of a mile from the road, fronted by the curving driveway lined by slender trees and cultivated bushes. At the rear sweeping lawns reached to a high fence that encircled the acreage. A paved patio jutting out from the back of the house had a large swimming pool and a stepped terrace that allowed observers to look down on the pool.

Bolan had climbed the fence during the early morning hours and was concealed in the dense foliage of the garden that occupied the northeast corner of the property. From his vantage point he was able to watch the back of the house without being seen himself. He used the powerful binoculars he had purchased to maintain a solid watch over the house, and during the couple of hours he had been in position he had spotted the appearance of van Ryden's security team. It consisted of a pair of armed men, dressed in suits and ties, who made regular patrols around the property. Bringing them into detailed closeup Bolan saw the sentries wore lightweight headsets that allowed them to communicate with each other, and maybe an internal control, as they patrolled the grounds. The paved driveway now held three expensive cars.

At 7:30 a.m. van Ryden, dressed in bathing shorts, stepped out through French doors. He hit the water and for the next twenty minutes swam up and down the length of the pool. He finally emerged and picked up the towel he had brought out with him.

Bolan watched him walk back inside the house, picked up the MP-5 he had brought with him from the dock mission and began to work his way through the foliage in the direction of the house. He reached the north corner, staying in the cover provided by the heavily bushed garden and waited until the sentry appeared. The man had an MP-5 hanging by a strap from his left shoulder, his hand resting lightly on the weapon. He walked past Bolan's hiding place with feet to spare. Once he had his back to him Bolan rose silently, stepped up behind the man and took him in a blood choke hold, applying instant pressure to carotid and jugular.

Starved of blood the sentry had little chance to fight back. As soon as he felt the man's legs weaken Bolan followed him down, keeping up the pressure until the sentry lost consciousness. With the sentry on the ground Bolan disabled the comset and stripped it clear. He threw it aside, into the

tangle of bushes. From his back pocket Bolan pulled out a couple of the plastic ties. He looped one around the sentry's ankles, another to bind his hands behind him. Aware that the man could recover quickly Bolan took off the guard's tie, balled it up and stuffed it into the man's mouth. He took the magazine out of the man's MP-5 and threw both items deep into the undergrowth. He located a handgun, holstered under the man's coat. Bolan disassembled the weapon and scattered the parts.

The Executioner had studied the routes the pair of sentries had taken. He fell in behind the second man, trailing silently in his shadow until he was walking the paved path that ran down the side of the house's double garage. It was the ideal spot to deal with the man. Bolan moved up, ready to strike.

The sentry stopped suddenly, reaching up to check his comset, speaking into the microphone. Bolan didn't understand the words, but he picked up the urgent tone when the man failed to get a response from his partner. The sentry turned about, ready to retrace his steps. The first thing he saw was Bolan, poised only feet away. The sentry responded swiftly, snatching at his shoulder-hung weapon. Bolan closed in quickly, his left hand grasping the barrel of the submachine gun, forcing it skyward. His right hand snapped forward, closing around the sentry's throat, pushing him hard against the garage wall. The back of the man's skull slammed against the brickwork, the impact stunning him briefly and allowing Bolan the opportunity to lean in closer, turning and dragging the man's gun arm down across his shoulder. The sentry's resistance lasted only for as long as it took for his arm to snap. The MP-5 slipped from splayed fingers.

Bolan spun, braced himself and launched a full-on right fist that connected with the sentry's jaw. The impact threw the man to his knees, spitting blood. Bolan slammed his foot between his shoulders and hammered him to the ground, the man's face crunching against the concrete. As he bent to relieve the man of his handgun Bolan picked up radio chatter. He pulled off the guard's headset and listened closely. Someone was demanding a response in Dutch. Even though he couldn't understand the language Bolan recognized the urgency in the challenge.

Had his recon been spotted?

Whatever the reason for the agitation Bolan wasn't about to back off. He was too close to his target now.

He checked the handgun. It held a full magazine. He slung his MP-5 across his back. Turning he made his way around to the back of the house again, heading for the French doors van Ryden had used. The glass doors opened at his touch and Bolan slipped inside, pausing to check out the well-appointed room. Even his cursory examination told Bolan that everything in the room spoke of expensive taste. Recalling the detail Kurtzman had supplied this was the main living area. He knew van Ryden's study was directly through the arch ahead of him and to the right.

From somewhere beyond the room he heard a murmur of voices and footsteps on hardwood floors. Bolan moved to the far side of the room. If anyone came in they would be forced to take time to locate him. Maybe only for brief seconds but that would allow him the advantage.

Bolan spotted movement on the far side of the arch.

A tall, dark-haired man edged into the room. He carried the obligatory MP-5, the muzzle arcing back and forth as he surveyed what seemed to be an empty room. When he saw Bolan's dark figure against the end wall he tracked his weapon around, finger pulling back on the trigger. Slugs chunked into the wall, filling the air with plaster chips and dust.

Bolan's acquired auto pistol rapped out a fast trio of shots that hit the man in the chest. He stumbled back, a sharp cry bursting from his lips, and banged against the wall. As he did his finger held its trigger pull, sending 9 mm slugs into the wall above Bolan's head. More plaster dust erupted in white spouts. The shot man slipped to the floor, face contorted into a snarl of anger and he attempted to pull his submachine gun back on line. A fourth shot from Bolan caught him above the left eye, blowing a chunk of bone out of the back of his skull, spattering bloody debris on the door behind him.

Moving quickly Bolan crossed the room and stepped over the body, turning to scan the open hall and the doors beyond. He caught a flicker of movement ahead. He saw a figure emerge from an open door, pistol in hand. The man opened fire the moment he saw Bolan, then ran in a semicrouch across the open space, still triggering shots. Bolan heard the slugs thud into the wall. He stepped forward, dropping, holding the pistol double-handed as he picked up on the moving gunner. The Executioner fired off half the magazine, spent casings hitting the floor around him. The moving figure paused, lost coordination and crashed to the polished floor, skidding across the surface. The man rolled on his side, hauling his pistol around and fired again, not allowing himself time to lock on his target.

Bolan centered his weapon and returned fire, his slugs catching the gunman in the torso. The man let out a long gasp as he rolled slowly on his back and lay still. Bolan pushed to his feet and loped across to where the man lay. He kicked the dropped gun across the hall, threw aside the pistol that had locked on an empty chamber and drew the SIG-Sauer.

The house had fallen silent around him.

Four down.

Was that van Ryden's complete security complement?

Bolan figured that two on the outside, two more inside, would have been adequate under normal circumstances. Unless van Ryden recently felt he needed more. Bolan remained on full alert. Assumption could never replace caution. Complacency invited trouble. And Mack Bolan had never accepted complacency as a companion.

He picked up sounds from behind a closed door on the far side of the wide hall. He knew that was the study. Someone was speaking. Bolan flattened against the wall and picked up a voice he recognized.

It was van Ryden.

The conversation sounded one-sided. Bolan figured van Ryden was on the phone.

Calling in help?

The Executioner eased the door handle, pushing the door open. The room was large and airy. He saw book-lined shelves, a large desk, a picture window showing the grounds.

He spotted the hunched figure of the lawyer with a phone to his ear, free hand waving to emphasize his conversation. He had his back to Bolan. He did not hear him enter. Or close the door and engage the lock. He made a final plea, then slammed the phone down. As he straightened up his senses warned him he was not alone. There was a handgun on the desk next to the phone and van Ryden's hand made a tentative move toward it.

"Not advisable," Bolan cautioned.

The lawyer turned to face him. His face had lost its color. Right then he looked far from his smart public image. His hair, still damp from his swim, hung limply across his scalp and he needed a shave. He was dressed in a gray tracksuit and running shoes. And he was visibly distressed.

"You cannot do this," he said. "Invade my home. Attack my house staff."

Bolan shrugged.

“Are all domestics in Holland expected to walk around carrying machine guns and pistols? Hell of a way to greet visitors.”

A burst of defiance flared. “You are not a guest in my house. You are an invader. Have you forgotten who I am? A respected member of the legal profession. My name is known in high circles. I can have you arrested for breaching my human rights.”

“Words, van Ryden. Coming from a scum who trades in human lives. I haven’t forgotten what you are. You forfeited your rights when you took up your business. Remember what I told you in your office? I’m going to bring you and rest of your associates down. No hiding behind your *respectable* name.”

The lawyer snapped. Eyes widening with a reckless gleam, a scream of rage burst from his lips as he snatched up a heavy paperweight from the desk and swung it at Bolan, ignoring the gun pointing at him. Bolan leaned back, feeling the disturbed air stroke his face as the paperweight curved past. The lunge pulled van Ryden closer to Bolan and before he could regain his balance the Executioner hit him across the jaw with the P-226, putting every ounce of strength into the blow. As bone crunched and blood flew from his open mouth van Ryden slammed down across the desk, scattering papers. The paperweight slipped from his grasp. His face thumped against the hard surface of the desk. As he struggled to push himself upright Bolan stepped in closer and slammed the pistol down hard against the back of van Ryden’s skull. The lawyer groaned, his body becoming limp. Bolan stepped back as the lawyer slithered to the floor, sprawling on his back. His jaw was raw and bloody.

Putting the pistol away Bolan moved around the desk and sat down. He removed van Ryden’s handgun. The computer sat in front of him. Bolan figured the lawyer would have data stored somewhere within the machine detailing the trafficking operation. In his capacity as the organization’s facilitator he would need information. The problem was that the screen text Bolan was looking at was in Dutch. A language Bolan was unfamiliar with. Bolan took out his phone and keyed in the number to connect with Stony Man Farm.

“Striker,” Aaron Kurtzman acknowledged when he came on.

“I need you to hack into a computer and download everything on it, then get the data translated into English.”

“‘Hacking,’ as you put it, is for geeky amateurs. But I will electronically intrude into the hard drive and extract whatever is hidden there.”

“Okay. Tell me what to do.”

Bolan followed the concise instructions. With Kurtzman’s program installed on van Ryden’s computer it took less than ten minutes before the contents were transferred.

“I’ll get everyone working on this. You need anything else?” Kurtzman asked.

“How about emptying this system? Wiping the memory? Give these bastards more to worry about.”

“Sounds like someone has upset you, Striker.”

“And some.”

“A thought here. There could be backup to this data. Flash drives. I’ll clear the hard drive and leave a little visitor. If they try to reinstall the data my little buddy will pick it up and fritz that, as well. How’s that?”

“Pretty sneaky for a high-tech *hacker*.”

Kurtzman’s booming laughter rumbled through Bolan’s cell phone before he ended the call.

As the Executioner moved away from the desk the monitor screen began to flash with lines of rapidly scrolling codes. Kurtzman’s wipeout program had started, methodically eating its way through the data embedded in the computer’s hard drive.

The Executioner had reached the center of the room when he heard a rush of sound behind him. Bolan spun on his heel. He saw van Ryden halfway across the room, coming at him full-on. The lawyer’s face was wet with blood, more of it making dark streaks down the front of his track suit, his mouth open as he let out a long, harsh scream of anger. Bolan saw the slim-bladed letter opener the man had snatched up off the desk. It was aimed in Bolan’s direction. But van Ryden was no combat veteran. It was unlikely he had ever been in a violent situation in his life.

Bolan let the man get in close before he sidestepped, slamming a hard-edged hand across the knife wrist. As the blade spun from his nerveless fingers van Ryden squealed. In desperation he lashed out. Bolan caught the arm, turning it. He spun van Ryden in a half circle, then released his arm. The man’s own weight carried him across the room. Out of control he crashed head-on into a glass-fronted display cabinet. His shout of fright was

lost in the sound of shattering glass. Scattered porcelain figurines suddenly spattered with blood as van Ryden's severely gashed throat began to spurt. He fell to the floor, body going into spasm as his lifeblood began to spread in a wide, glistening pool from beneath his body.

"No more human rights for you to abuse, Mr. van Ryden," Bolan said as he left the room.

The phone call van Ryden had been making to his associates was more than likely to bring reinforcements. It was on Bolan's mind as he retraced his steps from the house, through the grounds and out to where he had parked his rented SUV. He slid the unused MP-5 beneath the seat. Climbing behind the wheel he started the engine and followed the narrow back road until he joined up with the main route.

Inspector Marcel DeChambre, Interpol, and joint task-force member, parked across the street from the hotel where the man known as Cooper was staying. He had made a telephone call a half hour earlier to be informed that Cooper was not at the hotel, and no, he had not checked out.

So where was he?

DeChambre's long fingers tapped impatiently against the steering wheel. He needed a result. The explicit order from Hugo Canfield had explained things very clearly. He expected DeChambre to come up with something that would identify Cooper. Canfield's message held a direct threat. He had not been paying DeChambre large amounts of money for the fun of it. He expected the Frenchman to earn his keep. If he didn't...There was no need for the sentence to be completed.

DeChambre understood. He had been associated with the Englishman long enough to have witnessed how Canfield dealt with those who let him down. Or betrayed him. DeChambre had been present when the two American undercover agents had been eliminated. The men DeChambre had betrayed when he informed on them to Canfield.

The extreme torture before the men were killed had convinced DeChambre that the man meant every word. Now he was under the spotlight. And there was no avoiding it. He served up Cooper, or paid the price for his own incompetence in not knowing the man had been sent to check out what had happened to Turner and Bentley.

Informing Canfield about the agents had been a good moment in his relationship with the man. It hadn't been a lasting moment. Canfield didn't concern himself about former successes. He lived in the moment and this particular moment was not boding too well for the trafficking group. The man named Cooper had already created enough problems. Apart from killing Bickell and his team, Cooper had brazenly walked into van Ryden's office and had presented the lawyer with his intentions to take down Venturer Exports. It had been a direct challenge, given by a man who

plainly did not work within official rules. Cooper had then moved on to intercept a freshly arrived shipment, taking out the crew, freeing the cargo and getting them into the hands of the task force.

Canfield had been angry at this deliberately provocative act and it had been made crystal clear to DeChambre that he had to identify, locate and terminate Cooper.

No excuses.

No delays.

DeChambre's problems began when he made casual inquiries into the identity of the man who had handed the task-force information in the form of live evidence. No one had any idea who the man was. None of the agents working the case appeared to be worried about that. They were more concerned with what they could get from the freed people and the wounded crew member from the dock. DeChambre had not been able to discover where the man had been taken. The agents within the task force were staying silent on that matter and DeChambre stopped asking questions after a while, not wanting to make himself conspicuous.

Cooper had presented himself to Bickell as being from the same American department as Turner and Bentley. He had advertised his arrival time in Rotterdam and the hotel where he was staying. When DeChambre made a computer check of his own the search for Cooper came up blank. It was as if the man did not exist. That puzzled the Interpol agent even more. He made a deeper check, opening his search even wider. And still came up with nothing.

So he went looking for Cooper using old-fashioned policing methods. Sitting in his car across the street from the hotel, staring out through the rain-speckled windshield, he found his mind wandering away from Cooper to the subject of his own mortality. He had no doubt in his mind that if he failed to satisfy Hugo Canfield's demands, his life would end very quickly. He accepted the fact. Marcel DeChambre was a realist. No one had forced his hand when Canfield made him the offer to join his organization. If he had a weakness it was for money. His position within Interpol was never going to make him a rich man. By contrast his association with Venturer Exports had created opportunities DeChambre had never dreamed of. Canfield's extended influence brought DeChambre into contact with a number of the man's powerful friends in Rotterdam and throughout France. DeChambre's position within Interpol allowed him to work favors for these

people. In return he received substantial financial rewards. DeChambre's nest egg had grown accordingly. He had hidden accounts, each holding extremely healthy balances. DeChambre wanted to be able to enjoy his money. That might not happen if he didn't locate and eliminate Cooper.

DeChambre felt the need for a cigarette. He thrust a hand into the pocket of his dark raincoat and pulled out a packet of *Gitanes*. The dark, extremely strong French cigarettes had been his favorite since his teenage years. His taste had never changed. With the current war on smoking—something DeChambre detested with a vengeance—*Gitanes* had ceased to be made in France. Ironically they were now manufactured in the Netherlands and DeChambre always kept a good supply in his apartment, bought from a small importer he knew. He lit one now, using a wooden match. He refused to pander to the trend for disposable gas lighters, convinced they ruined the flavor. Sitting back he drew deeply, inhaling the rich aroma. Wreaths of blue smoke drifted through the interior of the car. As he smoked he felt his mood ease a little. It was the effect of the tobacco, he knew. He was on his second cigarette when he recognized Cooper as the man alighted from a dark SUV. Cooper carried a bag with him as he went into the hotel.

DeChambre took out his cell phone, deciding he needed some of Canfield's backup crew. He saw that the phone was still switched off from the previous night. Still smarting from Canfield's demands he had forgotten to turn the damn thing on before leaving his Rotterdam apartment. As it powered up DeChambre saw a number of missed calls up and he recognized the caller's number.

Canfield.

He hit redial and sat waiting for his call to be picked up.

"Where the bloody hell have you been? What's the fucking point of a cell phone if you don't switch it on? What the hell am I paying you for, DeChambre?" Canfield shouted.

"Wait. I've spotted Cooper. He just walked back into his hotel. I've been sitting across the road for a few hours, but he's here now."

"Am I supposed to be happy about that?" Canfield's voice rose an octave. "While you've been perched on your Gallic derriere Cooper has been busy. He turned up at van Ryden's house first thing this morning. Disabled the security crew—three of them are dead. And so is van Ryden. The bastard wiped the memory from his computer. Now I'm bloody certain he

downloaded all the data on van Ryden's hard drive first. So understand why I'm not exactly wild with joy just because you've actually seen the bugger."

"I need some local backup and van Ryden should have given me a number to call—"

"He isn't exactly in any condition to give out numbers. And you don't have time to wait around for help. Christ, Marcel, you're a cop. Go into that hotel and arrest him. Drive to a deserted spot and put a bullet through him. The man is acting like a vigilante. No jurisdiction. Taking the law into his own hands. You arrested him and he tried to make a break. Make something up."

"Yes. I suppose I could do that."

"We can protect you. All I need to do is make a couple of calls. But I need that man out of the way. He's only been in the country five minutes and he's creating chaos. Just get it done." Canfield paused, then said, "I'll see what I can do with backup."

The call ended, leaving DeChambre holding a dead cell phone.

He stared at the hotel. The rain had increased again, dropping heavily from the leaden sky. The gloom only added to DeChambre's sullen mood. He lit another cigarette, drawing on it so hard the smoke stung the back of his throat. DeChambre decided he could have used a large tumbler of cognac to take away the taste.

He couldn't believe van Ryden was dead.

That was a shock. It was obvious that Cooper took no prisoners. Well, he wasn't going to find DeChambre so easy to dispose of.

He reached under his coat and eased out his pistol. A Glock 21.45 ACP. DeChambre checked the weapon and returned the 13-round magazine. He returned it to his shoulder rig, making sure the weapon hung right, then opened the car door and stepped out. He locked the vehicle and made a quick run across the road, depositing his cigarette in the gutter. In the lobby he shook the rain off his coat and crossed to the reception desk. Before the clerk could speak DeChambre showed his Interpol badge, leaning forward to speak quietly.

"It is important I check out a guest. May I see your register?"

The computer screen was turned so DeChambre could view the guest list. He located the name he was looking for and the room number.

"Thank you."

The clerk fingered his collar nervously. "Is there a problem?"

DeChambre shook his head. "Purely a routine check on a possible visa irregularity. Everything is fine."

As he walked away from the desk DeChambre glanced at the clerk. The man watched him for a few moments, then turned away, distracted by another inquiry. The moment the clerk's head was turned DeChambre turned and crossed the lobby, taking the stairs. Cooper was on the third floor. He took out his cell and this time deliberately turned it off. The last thing he needed was the phone ringing at the wrong moment.

As he climbed the stairs, DeChambre prepared himself. The Glock was drawn, thrust into the deep right-hand pocket of his topcoat. He kept his fingers curled around the grip of the pistol. DeChambre reached the third floor and paced along the carpeted corridor, counting off the room numbers until he reached Cooper's. The Frenchman paused. A slight sheen of sweat covered the palm of his hand holding the gun. It was not the first time DeChambre had needed to do something like this on his own. He breathed deeply, calming himself.

Damn Canfield.

The man could have made this easier by sending along some local backup. But Hugo Canfield was not in the business of making things easy for those in his employ. It was a part of the man's makeup. A need to show his authority. His utter strength and power. And no matter what DeChambre thought personally he would do what Canfield instructed, because the man owned him.

DeChambre raised his left hand and knocked on the door.

MACK BOLAN TURNED at the sound. The last thing he expected was a visitor. Though it might be a hotel employee with fresh towels or something of that nature he would never assume anything.

He picked up his pistol, pushing it into the waistband of his pants, against his spine. Crossing to the door he stood to one side.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Cooper, my name is DeChambre. Inspector Marcel DeChambre. Interpol. Liaison with the task force. I need to speak with you urgently."

Bolan's mind worked swiftly. As far as he knew, his location in Rotterdam had not been broadcast to anyone outside of Brognola's area of responsibility. No communication had been sent to any European agency,

even though the task force had some interdepartmental links. His thoughts covered the facts even as he opened the door and faced DeChambre.

The man was tall, lean, his head of thick dark hair still damp from the rain. He had a strong beak of a nose above a wide mouth. He raised his left hand after dipping it into his coat pocket, showing Bolan the ID wallet with his Interpol credentials. A shadow of a friendly smile edged his lips. Bolan ignored that. His gaze settled on DeChambre's gray-blue eyes. There was no friendliness there. The eyes mirrored the cold enmity the Frenchman held.

"May I come in?" the man asked.

Polite. Exhibiting a professional courtesy that was intended to relax Bolan.

"Sure," the Executioner said.

Bolan kept himself to one side as DeChambre stepped into the room. The man's right hand remained inside his coat pocket. Bolan followed the contours of the cloth, the shape of DeChambre's hand. It was a hand that was gripping something solid, fingers curled around the object. Bolan pushed the door shut, then watched as DeChambre made a slow turn to face him.

"I was hoping I might get a chance to rest up," Bolan remarked, keeping his voice conversational. "One of the problems of having a superior like Dillon. That man is so on the fast-track for promotion he keeps us on the go 24/7."

Bolan gave DeChambre points for a quick reaction. His moment of blankness was smoothed over by a Gallic shrug. "It is the same with my own superiors."

In that moment he was thinking about Hugo Canfield. But only as a superior in control, certainly not in intellect. Canfield was nothing but a thug in expensive clothing. Wealthy and powerful, but basically a peasant.

"You must have heard the man at briefings. Holds the floor and won't shut up," Bolan said.

DeChambre hesitated, slightly thrown off stride. He had no knowledge of a man named Dillon. Had not heard him speak. Had never seen him. He had been hoping to deal with Cooper without any difficulty. The American faced him, hands at his sides, apparently comfortable with the way the conversation was going.

"I am not—" he began.

“Familiar with Dillon?”

Now the American’s tone had altered, his words taking on a harder edge. And the way he was staring at him made DeChambre nervous.

“I understand that,” Bolan said. “Seeing how Dillon doesn’t exist.”

Bolan saw the material of DeChambre’s coat pocket move. Watched his arm draw back as the Frenchman began to take his hand out.

Bolan saw the dark metal of the pistol as it started to emerge from the pocket. He stepped forward, hands reaching out to catch hold of DeChambre’s gun arm. DeChambre tensed, resisting, which was just how Bolan had expected him to react. The Executioner turned in, slamming into DeChambre as he executed a fast hip throw that launched the Frenchman across the room.

DeChambre crashed down on the bed. The recoil from the thick mattress threw him onto the floor, breath gusting from his lungs as he hit. Bolan didn’t allow him any chance. He saw DeChambre’s right hand, fully clear of the pocket, still gripping the Glock. Bolan stamped down hard on DeChambre’s hand. He heard bones crunch a split second before DeChambre squealed in pain. Blood oozed from between the shattered fingers and Bolan kicked the pistol across the room. He bent and caught hold of DeChambre’s coat lapels, hauling the man to his feet. DeChambre’s face had turned ashen, thick hair falling over his eyes.

“You’re the worst kind of man. A cop who betrays his own kind.”

“They were American agents. I owed them nothing,” DeChambre said.

The Frenchman threw up his left arm, jamming his hand beneath Bolan’s chin, forcing his head back. Ignoring his pain he used his right arm to hammer at Bolan’s face. DeChambre was no weakling. Bolan could feel the strength in his hard body as they briefly struggled for advantage. He felt the slam of DeChambre’s knee against his thigh, absorbed the impact and retaliated with a savage head butt that rocked the Frenchman back on his heels. The stunning blow distracted DeChambre long enough for Bolan to circle his neck with one arm and twist the man off balance. As DeChambre turned, Bolan punched him hard under his ribs, delivering a number of crippling blows that left the Frenchman choking for breath. Weakened, DeChambre offered no resistance when Bolan pushed him upright and slammed a fist into the French cop’s jaw. DeChambre backpedaled, coming up short against the wall, and hit the floor in a bloody heap.

He was too stunned to offer any further resistance as Bolan bent over him and emptied his coat pockets while checking for additional weapons. He tossed the items onto the bed.

“Nothing worse than a crooked cop. And especially one who turns on his own kind and allows them to be killed.”

“Turner and Bentley knew what they were doing. You carry the badge, you stand the risk. What should I do? Cry for them?”

For a cold, heart-shrinking moment DeChambre thought the big American was about to turn on him. His cocky attitude became a greasy lurch in the pit of his stomach. The expression on his opponent’s face was truly frightening. Then the moment passed.

“Get on your feet. We’re leaving soon,” Bolan said.

“Where are we going?” DeChambre demanded.

“You’re going to be delivered to some of your friends in the task force. The American contingent. They’ll be really pleased to meet one of the men involved in the deaths of their buddies.”

“You cannot do that.”

“Give you odds I can,” Bolan said.

He took out his cell and made contact with Brognola. He explained briefly that he had a gift for the U.S. agents on the task force. When he told Brognola who he had and what the man was involved with, the big Fed said he would make contact about a handover location.

“If I was you, DeChambre, I would wave goodbye to my Interpol pension,” Bolan said.

The Frenchman made no reply. He seemed more concerned with nursing his damaged hand.

Brognola called back within ten minutes, offering Bolan a location where he could meet up with members of the U.S. task-force contingent.

“No questions asked,” Brognola said. “Lead man is Neil Youngman. Just deliver DeChambre and get on your way. Okay?”

“Thanks.”

Bolan ended the call. He pulled on his jacket and gestured for DeChambre to move. He showed him the SIG-Sauer before he slid it just inside the jacket. DeChambre slid his damaged hand into his coat pocket.

“Out the door. Turn right. Left at the junction. We can go down the emergency stairs. No games, DeChambre. The jury is out on you at the moment, so don’t play clever.”

They negotiated the concrete steps to the ground floor, emerging through the fire door into the alley next to the hotel. Bolan stayed just behind DeChambre. The alley brought them to the main street. The sidewalk was close to being deserted. The rain was keeping people inside.

“My car is just beyond the main entrance. Straight to it and get in.”

Bolan indicated the SUV and they moved in the direction of the vehicle. They had almost reached it when three men stepped out from the hotel entrance. One ranged in close behind and Bolan felt the hard press of a pistol muzzle against his spine. A second stood on Bolan’s right, his own weapon visible under his coat. The third man confronted DeChambre, a thin smile on his lips.

“Good of you to bring him out to us,” he said in English.

“Bertran, he has a gun under his jacket,” DeChambre said, turning to face Bolan. DeChambre wagged a finger at the SUV. “We won’t be riding in your vehicle, after all,” he said. “We can go across the street and get into my friends’ car. Is that going to be a problem, Mr. Cooper?”

“Not for me,” Bolan said calmly.

The man facing Bolan took the SIG-Sauer from his hand. Bolan’s pockets were searched and his cell phone was removed and it vanished inside the man’s coat.

Bertran took out his own phone and dialed a number. He moved aside from the group as they began to cross the street, so his conversation couldn’t be heard by the American.

“Valk, we have him. Where are you? On your way? Okay. Listen, we’re taking Cooper to the site as arranged. Why don’t you and Lucien wait outside the hotel. We’ll handle this end. When we are done we’ll join you and DeChambre can get us into Cooper’s room. We need to check it for anything he might have about the organization. You may want to keep an eye on his vehicle too. Dark blue Toyota SUV. Parked at the curb outside the hotel.” He quoted the license plate number. “Okay? We will see you later.”

Bertran finished the call and nodded to DeChambre as he rejoined them.

“Time to go, then,” DeChambre said.

“You’re not as clever as you believed you were,” DeChambre said. He nodded curtly at the men covering Bolan. “Your task-force friends are going to have a disappointing wait.” He gestured impatiently. “Get him in the car. Let’s get away from here before anyone becomes curious.”

Bolan was pushed into the back of the elderly Citroën waiting by the opposite curb and flanked by a man on either side. DeChambre climbed in beside the driver. The car moved off with a brief squeal of rubber against the road surface, taking the first corner fast. The man beside Bolan rolled with the sway of the car and the Executioner felt the hard outline of the pistol holstered against the man’s right hip. He filed away the knowledge.

“You have upset too many people, Cooper. Cost us a great deal of money and caused much damage. Naturally you are not very popular with my employer,” DeChambre said.

“That would be Hugo Canfield,” Bolan replied. “Knowing that makes my day worthwhile.”

DeChambre turned to face Bolan. The Frenchman’s face was flushed with anger. Self-consciously he reached up to finger the bruises that spread across his face. He exposed his battered hand, staring at the livid, bloody flesh. He reached inside his coat and drew out a handkerchief. DeChambre wrapped it around his injured hand, wincing against the pain.

“Make all the clever jokes you want. Just be aware that you have very little time left. In fact, only for as long as this ride lasts. When we reach our destination you are going to die. Simple as that. Dead simple. You see, even I can make clever remarks.”

“They say the French have no sense of humor. I think you just proved it.”

DeChambre’s expression hardened. His good hand gripped the top of the seat, knuckles growing pale.

“Can’t this thing go any faster?” he snapped at the driver.

The man shrugged, but responded by jamming his foot down hard on the pedal and the Citroën increased speed.

Bolan could see they were passing through an industrial area. Warehouses and buildings flashed by, the majority of them empty. Over to one side Bolan saw the tall cranes and machinery of construction sites. A redevelopment area. He understood why DeChambre had chosen this place for his intended disposal of his problem.

It was time, then, the Executioner decided, to make his play, because the window of opportunity was closing fast.

Without warning he slammed the point of his elbow into the throat of the man on his immediate left, hearing the soft crunch of cartilage. The man clutched at his throat, gagging nosily. The moment he struck, Bolan leaned forward and wrapped both arms around the driver's neck, applying severe pressure and wrenching the man's neck with enough force to snap the vertebra. The driver uttered a startled gasp, his body rising from his seat, control of the speeding car lost in an instant. The Citroën began to swerve back and forth across the road.

Bolan felt his second minder lunge at him, hands scrabbling for contact. With the driver incapacitated the Executioner swiveled to meet his attacker, slamming an open palm full into the man's face, the heel of his hand connecting with the nose. The man's head snapped back, blood starting to blossom and pour down over his mouth and chin. Bolan's follow-up punch failed to land as the driverless Citroën was still veering wildly from side to side, throwing the occupants around like loose sacks of grain. Bolan gained a handhold, grabbing one of the trailing seat belts and wrapping it around his wrist. He held on hard as the car hit the rough edge of the road, wheels climbing up the turned-earth bank. The car's weight and speed carried it along the bank for several yards, the vehicle tilted at an angle.

Suddenly the wild ride came to an abrupt end. The nose of the Citroën smashed into a large concrete block partially sunk into the edge of the road. It was a section of construction fabrication waiting for removal. The block was solid, reinforced with steel rods, and it barely moved under the impact. The effect on the car was extreme. The hood collapsed as the engine was pushed back into the passenger compartment. Steel buckled and glass showered the interior. Neither DeChambre nor the driver were wearing seatbelts and the driver was thrown forward into the steering wheel, then partway out through the windshield. DeChambre, with nothing to restrain

him, was propelled out through the gap, his upper body slamming into the concrete block with enough force to crush his head to a bloody pulp and shatter bones.

If Bolan had not had the presence of mind to grab the nylon belt strap he might have ended up in the front of the car himself. He was thrown against the front seats, breath driven from his body. The two men with him, already immobilized, were battered by the effects of the crash. As the Citroën rocked to a halt Bolan had to push the limp forms off him before he could kick open a door and half tumble from the wrecked car. He hit the wet ground with a thump and lay sucking in harsh breaths. His chest hurt and his ribs ached. He lay still for a while until his breathing settled, then pushed to his feet, slumping against the side of the car.

Canfield's organization was persistent if little else. The man was fighting hard to preserve his business empire, and violent action appeared to be his hallmark. If that was what he wanted Bolan was happy to respond. He was determined to close down Canfield's sleazy operation. And he would battle his way through Canfield's entire crew, if necessary.

The Executioner glanced around. The area still appeared deserted and no one had come forward to check out the site of the crash. It would be better for Bolan if he distanced himself from the area before anyone did show up. He remembered that one of DeChambre's men had taken his gun. Bolan pushed away from the side of the car and leaned in to locate his weapon.

A slight movement warned him too late. The toe of a shoe slammed across the side of his face. The blow shoved Bolan back a couple of steps, pain flaring over his cheekbone. Bolan saw a figure push out of the open door, blood covering the lower half of his face.

The man whose nose he had broken.

The thug exited the car in a rush that carried him into Bolan, slamming the tall American off balance. The man wrapped both arms around Bolan's body, digging in his heels as he increased the pressure. Bolan felt his ribs move. The man was no weakling. He snuffled harshly through his shattered nose, spraying blood. Bolan jammed both hands under the man's chin and pushed hard, forcing the head back.

There was a momentary standoff, each man going for gold until Bolan slammed one knee up between his opponent's thighs. The man gave a screech of pain, his encircling arms slackening off. Bolan gave a final push

and the startled minder was left open. A sledging fist slammed against the man's jaw, flinging his head to the side, giving Bolan the chance to grab a handful of thick hair. He swung hard, whacking the man's skull against the edge of the Citroën's roof a couple of times. The man went down without another sound.

Bolan searched the pockets of the man's coat and located his cell phone, the SIG-Sauer and the spare magazines. Jamming the gun back into his waistband Bolan pocketed everything else, then turned away from the scene, retracing the route to the main road.

It took him close to a half hour and it was getting near dusk by the time Bolan found himself walking back toward the city. For once the rain had reduced to a fine drizzle. It was a small thing but he was getting tired of Rotterdam's wet season. It was a couple of miles before he hit the outer city and found he had a signal again on his phone. He punched in Brognola's number and let it ring until his friend's voice came through.

"Call off the meet. I won't be delivering DeChambre. I had a little confrontation with him and some of his buddies. They wanted to take *me* for a one-way ride. It ended badly."

"I'll have the team advised. What's going on over there, Striker?"

"Everyone I meet wants me dead, Hal. These are seriously terminally minded jokers."

"You're upsetting their paradise. On the bright side I spoke to my task-force contact. They have all those women in secure placements. And some detail has been forthcoming. The women have identified photographs, picking out some of the people involved in snatching them off the streets. All that is going to help build up the files on Venturer Exports. But still not enough to move on it. That lawyer of Canfield's would be hopping all over the scene before we moved a stick of furniture."

"Canfield's favorite lawyer won't be serving any more writs. The man is dead."

"Score one for us? So what are you thinking now, Striker?"

"That the world has forgotten the difference between doing the right thing and standing by watching."

"Striker, we've had this conversation before. If the task force went in now and arrested everyone on Canfield's payroll who would benefit? His second-team lawyers would scream abuse of human rights, quoting every law on the books, and without every charge sheet being one-hundred-and-

one-percent absolutely correct down to the last full stop, the whole crew would walk. Justice, here and in Europe would be slapped with writs, false-arrest accusations and claims for defamation. We'd have compensation claims being stuffed into every orifice. And Hugo Canfield would be sitting in his plush offices having a glass of champagne while he set up his next trafficking deal."

"You know how to cheer a man up, Hal."

"They are lousy, lower-than-low scumbags, Striker. Safe because they're having the last laugh at us. They know it. We know it."

"They may be laughing, Hal, but it won't be for long. Right now they're hurting and I aim to make them hurt even more. One more strike here in Rotterdam, then I'm going after Canfield and his U.K. setup."

"McCarter's man in London will have what you need. I'll look out for smoke rising over Big Ben."

After he ended the call Bolan looked around for a cruising taxi. He had had enough of walking around Rotterdam's rainy streets.

"IT'S BEEN TOO LONG," Valk said again, glancing at his watch. "They should be back by now."

"So where are they?" his partner asked.

"Try Bertran's cell again," Valk suggested.

Lucien nodded and dialed the number. He waited as the cell rang out, shaking his head.

Valk banged his fist on the steering wheel. "Why don't they answer?"

"You think maybe something went wrong?"

"Actually, yes."

"So what do we do?"

"One thing we don't do is call Canfield and admit our suspicions. You know what they do to the messenger with bad news."

Lucien managed a weak smile. Their employer's volatile moods were legend. No one ever wanted to get on Hugo Canfield's bad side. Or incur a visit from the man called Sergeant Gantley. He found himself reaching inside his coat for the pistol nestling in its shoulder holster. When his fingers touched the smooth steel it gave Lucien a sliver of comfort.

"This man. Cooper. He's no fool. Look what he did to van Ryden and his team. And at the landing dock. Valk, we should cover ourselves. Maybe

he got away from Bertran and the others. Maybe we...”

Valk wasn't listening. He was staring out through the car window, past the rain spatter and the gloom. He was watching a tall figure emerging from a taxi that had just pulled up outside the hotel.

Tall.

Black hair.

An athletically built man dressed in black.

He paid the driver and moved down the sidewalk to an SUV parked at the curb. It was the vehicle that Bertran had identified as belonging to Cooper.

“I think that's him,” Valk said. “Damn, it has to be him.”

Lucien saw the man in question checking the SUV before turning and going into the hotel. He was about to ask what they should do, but when he saw that Valk had taken his own pistol from its holster, screwing on the threaded sound-suppressor, he knew he didn't need to ask.

“Let him get to his room,” Valk said. “No fucking about, Lucien. I don't want this bastard playing any of his fancy tricks with us. We go in hard and shoot him. Plain and simple. It's past time for being polite.”

“If that is Cooper—where are Bertran and the others?”

“If that *is* Cooper,” Valk answered, “I think we already know where they are.”

Lucien attached his own sound-suppressor. He slid the pistol back inside the holster, then ran the back of his hand across dry lips. He glanced at his partner and saw that Valk was wearing that expression he always displayed when he had worked himself into a killing mood.

“Let's do it,” Valk said.

He was out of the car, striding across the street before Lucien could say a word. All he could do was step out himself and follow Valk to the hotel entrance.

They crossed the lobby and went to the desk where Valk caught the attention of the clerk.

“Hey, wasn't that the American, Cooper? The guy who just came in?” Valk had a wide grin on his face.

He turned to Lucien. “I said it was Cooper. Didn't he say he was staying here?” He turned back to the clerk. “I'm right? Cooper? We've been tracking him all day. Supposed to be going to a company celebration tonight, but he vanished earlier.”

Valk lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Sly guy—I think he met one of the saleswomen at the party last night and when we looked around he was gone.” He glanced at his watch. “Only a couple of hours and he’s supposed to be giving the big speech tonight. We don’t get him there on time we’ll be sweeping the streets tomorrow.”

Lucien nodded, caught up in his partner’s enthusiastic charade. “That’s right. Help us out, friend. We need to get him all tidied up and daisy fresh. What’s his room number?”

Valk had his cell phone out, tapping in a number. “Got to call our boss. Tell him everything’s okay. Then see if we can drag Cooper back on form.”

He went through the pantomime of talking to someone on the other end of the line. In fact, he had dialed his own home number and was speaking to his own phone, making up the dialog as he went along.

“We have him getting ready now, sir. What? No problem. We’ll have him there on time. Yes, sir. My word, sir.”

He closed the phone, glanced at his watch again. “Cooper? Room number? Please...”

The young clerk, looking from one man to the other, caught up in the excitement of the moment, blurted out the room number.

“Thanks, friend. You have saved our sanity and probably our jobs.” Valk slapped Lucien on the shoulder. “Come on, let’s go and get Cooper ready.”

As the two headed for the elevator bank, Valk waved at the clerk. “Thanks, friend, you did us a real favor there.”

The clerk watched the elevator doors close, frowning as the rush calmed down. He reached for the house phone and called the room occupied by the American named Cooper.

“*Mijnheer* Cooper? Reception. You have two visitors on their way up to you. They say they should be picking you up for a company social evening. Was I right in sending them up, sir? I hope I haven’t disturbed you, only you did say you wanted a meal sent up because you were not going out again...”

The phone cut off abruptly and the clerk was left feeling that he had indeed disturbed the hotel guest.

BOLAN DROPPED THE PHONE back on its cradle and turned toward the door. He opened it and checked the deserted corridor. The elevator bank was to his left. He stepped out of the room and pulled the door closed behind him. He walked quickly and quietly to the far end of the corridor, reaching the junction a few doors along where the corridor made a right-angle turn in the direction of the emergency exit, the same one he had used to get DeChambre out of the hotel. He pressed against the wall, leaning slightly forward so he could watch the empty corridor.

Seconds later the elevator pinged and the doors slid open with a subdued hiss.

Bolan saw two men step out, checking the corridor before they walked briskly to his door. The way they moved told him they were anything but hotel guests, and when they each produced an automatic pistol, both fitted with sound-suppressors, he needed no more convincing. They stopped at his door, one turning to stand watch while the other reached to knock.

When there was no response the pair exchanged glances. The man who had knocked said something that Bolan was unable to pick up, then stepped back to give himself space. Bolan realized what the man was about to do even before he raised his right foot prior to launching a kick at the closed door.

Bolan slid around the corner and drew down on the man standing watch. He spotted Bolan the moment he stepped into view and called a warning to his partner. The man then extended his gun arm, the muzzle of his pistol sliding across his buddy's shoulder. The SIG-Sauer in Bolan's hand cracked twice. The first slug took a chunk out of the target's right shoulder, blowing a spray of blood and flesh from his jacket. The force of the slug twisted the man half around so that Bolan's second shot hit him in the throat and knocked him off his feet, gagging for air.

As the crack of the shots echoed in the second man's ears he spun on one foot, exceptionally fast, his pistol tracking in quickly. He fired on the move, his slug chugging from the muzzle and tearing a gouge of plaster from the corner of the wall an inch over Bolan's head.

The first man had barely hit the carpet when Bolan retuned fire from his one-knee position on the floor. He saw the gunman react to the slug that powered into his chest, knocking him back against the wall. As he rebounded from the impact the man took two more slugs from Bolan's

weapon. They hit with tremendous force, shattering his spine. He faltered, surprise etched across his face as he fell face down on the carpet.

Bolan moved quickly, holstering his pistol, stepping over the bodies, and used his key card to open his door. In his room he picked up his bag. He always kept his belongings packed ready for a fast exit and right now that was what he wanted.

The thought crossed his mind that Canfield seemed determined to continue his attempts to get rid of him. How many more of his crew was he going to throw at Bolan?

Back in the corridor the Executioner turned and went for the emergency exit as he had done before, only this time he wouldn't be returning to his room. As he turned the corner of the corridor he realized that no one had come out of any of the rooms to check the disturbance. Either they hadn't heard the brief encounter because TV sets were playing, or the modern-day malady of minding their own business had struck once again. In a way he couldn't blame them. It was unfortunate that butting into the affairs of others often got the responsible individual into serious trouble, so people chose to stay behind their own closed doors.

As he descended the stairs Bolan knew that his luck would not hold for long. Sooner or later someone was going to find the bodies, and when they did, the missing Cooper was going to find himself the center of the Rotterdam police's attention.

He needed to distance himself from them quickly.

At street level he moved along the alley, reached the sidewalk and walked calmly to his waiting SUV. Bolan unlocked the vehicle and slid inside. He fired up the engine and eased away from the curb, merging with the traffic. He had no idea how long he might have before the cops picked up on his rental. In the time he did have he needed to lose the vehicle and get himself a fresh set of wheels.

HAL BROGNOLA WORKED his influence with the task force and arranged for Bolan to get his SUV off the streets. He parked in the basement garage of a derelict office block and left it for the task force to pick up. They had left a black BMW SUV for Bolan to take over. It had legitimate plates and no history that would attract attention from the local cops. The Toyota would

be lifted by a recovery truck, concealed under a tarp and driven to a task-force safe house.

“You understand, buddy, that the task force will deny any association with you and your activities if questions are asked?” Brognola had told him.

Bolan had smiled at that.

“Hal, those words are like an old, familiar song.”

“Off the record the team mans are high-fiving every time you hit Canfield’s organization. On a secondary note the two mans at the hotel turned out to be a couple of local hitters allied to Canfield’s group. Same as the ones who hijacked you along with DeChambre.”

“Hal, stayed tuned. ‘Radio Rotterdam’ hasn’t finished broadcasting yet.”

9

The following day found Mack Bolan preparing for his planned hit on Canfield's main distribution site in Holland. The farm and the processing plant occupied a large area off the main route out of Rotterdam. The information the man at the dock had given him proved to be extremely accurate.

It took Bolan more than an hour to reach the location. He noticed that the area he had driven through was taken up by similar industry. This part of the country grew vast quantities of agricultural produce that was distributed all across Europe and into the U.K. There were constant streams of vehicles towing large containers that held fresh supplies of vegetables and dairy products heading for distribution points. A large percentage of these vehicles were on their way to Rotterdam. Bolan saw a number of South East Containers trucks arriving and leaving the Knookreising Farm.

He sat at the side of the road studying the layout of the farm. There was a wide turn leading off the road onto a paved strip that terminated in the large freight yard fronting the farm. There was an office block and, behind that, the sprawl of large greenhouses and open strips of planted fields. To one side were the processing and packing sheds. It was an impressive setup.

Bolan moved his powerful binoculars to the far distance where, his research had informed him, the original farm still remained. He spotted a large house built in the 1950s. Next to it were traditional Dutch barns and outhouses. Bolan saw a couple of South East Containers trucks parked nearby. According to the maps he had studied there was a minor road that ran along the back of the property, close to the original farm setup. It seemed to offer the best opportunity for him to check out the place.

He glanced at his watch. Midafternoon. Overhead the sky was heavy with dark clouds. It looked as if he really had chosen Holland's rainy season to make his visit. Bolan started the SUV and pulled back onto the road. He drove a couple of miles before he spotted the narrow road that skirted the eastern perimeter of the farmland. It took him almost twenty minutes before

he found himself paralleling the main route. In that time he had encountered no traffic. The road he was on may have been the principal one when the original farm had been built, but the wider, faster main route had taken all the traffic. For Bolan's purpose that was ideal.

He pulled off the road, turning the BMW around before taking it down a rutted strip into the cover of tangled undergrowth. Out of sight Bolan was able to take his gear from the SUV's back and ready himself.

His intention was to dismantle Venturer Export's distribution base. Given the right equipment that would have been straightforward. But his access to specialist ordnance was virtually nil. Coming into the country unarmed and with no recourse to hardware meant the Executioner was winging his mission. Bolan didn't let that hold him back. He was just going to have to be a tad more creative. In the SUV he had the handguns confiscated from the opposition, plus the MP-5. The shoulder rig he had taken from one of the gunmen housed the SIG-Sauer. His second pistol was tucked behind his belt.

Before leaving Rotterdam Bolan had used some of the money taken from Canfield's people to outfit himself. A visit to a sporting goods store had offered him close substitutes for his combat gear. Combat-style pants, a thin sweater and a pair of sturdy walking boots—all in black. The photographer's jacket he had purchased at a store farther along the street provided pockets for his extra ammo clips. He slung the MP-5 across his back by the webbing sling and pulled on the dark cap he'd bought.

Exiting the vehicle Bolan eased along the bottom of the ditch and peered over the rim. A few lights were on in the farmhouse and buildings against the gloom of the afternoon and the overcast sky. He studied the layout. There would be adequate cover. He spotted parked farm machinery, stacks of crates and barrels. And he saw a few more people about than he might have expected on an old-fashioned farm. Bolan had a feeling they might be there because of him and the problems he had been creating for the traffickers. His appearance and interference had stirred them into defensive mode. Hit-and-run tactics had the effect of making the enemy nervous because they had no idea where or when he might strike again.

Look out, guys, I'm closer than you think.

The first drops of rain warned Bolan of the downpour about to come. He welcomed it. Rain would work more on his behalf than the opposition's. It would cover his approach. Deadened any sound. The rainfall began in

earnest, heavy drops bouncing off the road. Bolan used the rain as his cue, pushing up to the road, crouching low as he went across it and through the tall grass to the perimeter fence. The outer fence was no more than a couple of feet high, a simple three-bar structure. From there Bolan wound his way across a hard packed-earth strip and dropped to a kneeling position behind an ancient, rusting trailer. Its tires were flat and cracked, the paintwork long faded and flaking. Bolan dropped flat and crawled beneath the chassis, working his way along the trailer until he was able to look out across the main yard.

The first man he saw might have been a farmhand. His clothes were nondescript, made for heavy work, and so were the thick boots on his feet. But the squat submachine gun he carried close to his body had no place on a working farm. The next figure moving into Bolan's line of vision, clad in a similar fashion to the first man, also had an automatic weapon. The two men came together, shoulders hunched against the rain, sharing their patrolling misery and the cigarettes they lit. Their collars were pulled up and caps pulled down against the rain.

Watching them convinced Bolan they were protecting something with a much higher value than the tomatoes being produced across the way.

Human cargo.

Somewhere in the distance thunder rumbled, low and deep. The intensity of the rainfall increased. The armed guards parted company, each moving in a different direction. As one man moved out of sight the other one moved in Bolan's general direction, flicking his cigarette butt to the ground as he tramped past the old trailer, cutting across the rear of the farm property. Bolan watched where he went and waited patiently until he returned minutes later. There was no military precision in the patrolling. The man simply wandered, the submachine gun pressed close to his side as if he was afraid getting it wet might render it inoperative. He walked past Bolan again, moving down the side of the farm building, then pausing to presumably check out his area of responsibility. He kept looking skyward, displeased at the weather, shaking his head a couple of times as he turned and resumed his restless patrolling. When the Executioner saw the man moving into a shadowed area, he slid out from beneath the trailer and fell in behind him.

Typical of old, long-established farms, there were tumbledown sheds and more abandoned machinery scattered around the property. The grass

grew randomly, sprouting in defiant clumps between the rusting metal parts and cast-aside tires.

Bolan stalked his man until they were well to the back of the old house. He moved up without warning, catching his un-suspecting quarry in a powerful neck lock. He dragged the man to the wet ground, ignoring the man's frantic struggle for his weapon, the hoarse gasp from a restricted throat. Slamming one knee into the guard's lower spine Bolan hauled back until he felt vertebrae snap. The man went soft in his grasp. Bolan released him and pushed to his feet, stepping back, catching a final shuddering spasm before the guard became still. The Executioner took the man's weapon and threw it into an untidy stack of old machinery. He slid the body out of sight under a trailer.

One less gunman to worry about.

Bolan wanted no surprises from guards coming in behind his back. No probe, whether hard or soft, guaranteed total security. Reducing that probability was Bolan's only safeguard, though even he knew it wasn't going to shield him fully.

Flat against the end wall of the barnlike building, Bolan peered around the corner. The downed guard's partner was trudging up the slight incline, pulling up his coat collar and no doubt cursing the inclement weather. He slowed as he neared Bolan's position, looking around for his missing buddy, then continued on toward the corner of the barn.

Was he thinking his partner had stopped under cover for another cigarette? Maybe taking shelter from the downpour?

His casual movement gave the impression he was not alerted by any possible trouble.

Bolan let the man round the end of the barn, then used his right forearm to deliver a brutal throat strike. The guard's strangled cry was cut off before he could generate any warning sound. Trying to suck air through his crushed passages the man offered little resistance to Bolan's follow-up maneuver. He caught hold of the guard's coat collar and pulled down, driving his knee up into the vulnerable face. The solid impact drove the guard up and back. He slammed against the wood wall of the barn, splintering a couple of the weathered slats, then pitched facedown on the rain-sodden ground. Bolan relieved him of his weapons, hurling them into the shadowed piles of machinery.

He was turning away from the barn when something caught his eye. A gleam of metal showing through the gap created by the broken wood slats. Bolan checked it out. Pulling away a length of wood he saw an inner lining of steel sheeting. Something was constructed within the wooden shell of the old barn. He didn't waste time speculating, though he didn't expect to find anything good.

He heard a rumbling sound. The rainfall was increasing. The ground under Bolan's feet was quickly becoming waterlogged, the disturbed earth sluicing down the gradual slope in brown rivulets. He crept around the side of the barn. Some twenty feet away the raw earth gave way to a concrete apron that provided hard standing for the vehicles that would draw up to the barn access. From his position Bolan could see that the sliding door had been rolled back. One of the South East Containers trucks had reversed up to the door and Bolan watched as the container doors at the back of the truck were opened. Figures clustered around the opening. One of them was gesturing, his raised voice reaching Bolan. Hesitant figures appeared at the edge of the container. One of the men reached up and caught an arm, dragging a young woman down out of the container. She stumbled as she landed on the concrete. Other hands reached out to steady her balance before pushing her roughly inside the barn. Bolan counted six more women being removed from the truck. The container doors were closed and secured. Someone banged on the side of the truck and it pulled away, moving down toward the main farm buildings.

The Executioner had his confirmation.

He pulled the MP-5's sling over his head, running a quick check to confirm the weapon was set for use.

There was one man lingering near the barn door. He was leaning against the frame as he spoke into a cell phone, his head nodding as he talked. He wore a long dark coat and a baseball cap.

Bolan edged along the wall of the barn, his eyes fixed on the man. The downpour muffled any sound he might have made and Bolan was standing directly behind the man by the time he completed his call and pushed his phone into a pocket. The webbing sling flipped over the man's head and Bolan twisted it, pulling it tight against flesh. He pulled the man back and down, jamming a knee into the spine as the squirming, panicked man struggled to reach for his gun. The powerful muscles in Bolan's arms were taut under the pressure he was applying. The frantic struggles weakened;

the boot heels drumming against the concrete slowed, jerked into stillness. Bolan held his position for a few more seconds, then loosened his grip and drew the webbing strap over the man's head, dislodging the cap. He lowered the man to the wet concrete, caught hold of his collar and slid him away from the access door to the base of the barn wall.

With his MP-5 set for triple bursts Bolan edged around the access door, sparing a few seconds to assimilate the image.

The steel construction he had partially glimpsed through the broken barn slats was a twenty-foot-square lockbox, the front wall facing him, constructed of close-spaced bars with an inset door. Inside the box Bolan saw the group of young women from the container, some standing in listless poses, others sitting on the low cots that were bunched together at the far end of the box. Bolan's fingers tightened around the MP-5 as the image of the captive females registered. Herded into the steel box like so much cattle. Trapped, without hope, awaiting the next stage of their forced captivity.

On the far side of the barn were stored metal canisters and crates, some standing five high. There were also racks of wooden pallets and filled sacks.

In front of the stored goods were the men who currently dominated the frightening world the women had been forced into. The traffickers. Bolan had nothing but contempt for them as they talked and laughed, clustered around one of a number of desks holding a computer, the large monitor displaying pornographic images. Bolan counted five of them. They were intent on studying the screen images, oblivious to the Executioner's presence until one of them straightened to light a cigarette. He moved back from the main group, touching his lighter flame to the cigarette, casually glancing across the barn.

He saw Bolan.

His reaction was fast but not enough to allow himself and his partners clear space. The man shouted a warning, snatching at the handgun tucked behind his belt. He was still yelling when Bolan hit him with a 3-round burst that thudded into his chest, shoving him back against the edge of the desk. As the man arched back across the desk Bolan fed him three more slugs that shattered ribs and chewed at flesh.

The man's four colleagues scattered in a panic, reaching for weapons. A couple wore them in body holsters, the others grabbed at MP-5s on nearby desks.

By this time Bolan was on the move, angling in across the barn, his weapon up and firing, seeking targets. His mobility proved an asset. Bolan weaved about, laying down deadly fire that cut into the unprepared traffickers. His slugs punctured flesh, broke bone and caused bloody gouts and spurts. Only one of the crew got off retaliatory fire, yanking his own MP-5 around in a panicky sweep that sent gunfire ripping through the barn's timber walls. His action only lasted brief seconds before Bolan's strike continued. He stitched the man with a pair of triple bursts that slammed the trafficker back across the desk, dislodging the computer monitor and sending it crashing to the floor. The man rolled across the desk, arms thrown wide, his weapon spilling from his limp grasp.

Before he moved again Bolan exchanged the MP-5's magazine for a fresh one. It was time, mainly the lack of it, that dictated Bolan's actions. He crossed to the lockbox. The inset door was secured by a modern lock mechanism. He studied it, then heard a quiet voice. It came from one of the young women. He didn't understand the language and looked at her through the bars.

"English?" he asked.

She turned and gestured at one of the other girls, speaking to her.

"I understand a little," the young woman said. "There are...keys in drawer. I saw them put in there."

Bolan tracked her pointing finger and crossed to the desk she indicated.

"Yes. There."

He found a set of keys, took them back to the door and found the right one on the third attempt.

"Tell them to come out. We have to move quickly. Make them understand. Others may be coming because of the shooting," he said.

The woman nodded. She began to instruct the others and they responded without argument. They gathered at the barn door.

"That way," Bolan said. "You'll find a fence. A narrow road on the other side. Best I can do right now. Take them. Go."

"What will you do?" the woman asked.

"Whatever needs doing. Now get out of here."

The young woman nodded. Before she followed the others she bent to retrieve one of the abandoned handguns. "They will not touch us again," she said.

Bolan followed her to the door and watched the small group as they moved up the slope, away from the barn. He picked up sound coming from below his position. Turning Bolan saw an open-backed 4x4 swinging into view and racing in his direction. His presence on the farm was well and truly acknowledged now.

Bolan stepped out from cover to take the battle to the enemy.

10

The driver of the 4x4 raised a warning as the tall, dark-clad figure stepped out of the barn, the submachine gun in his hands raised. Beyond him the women from the lockbox were running free and clear. At the driver's shout one of the men standing in the exposed rear of the vehicle swung his weapon on-line and opened fire. The slight bounce of the 4x4 took his aim off-line and the stream of 9 mm slugs chewed wood from the barn wall, spitting splinters into the air.

The shooter's partner, less reckless, called him an idiot. He told him to hold back until they were closer. It might have been sound advice but in this case it did little to gain them any advantage.

The Executioner broke into a hard run, weaving slightly as he approached them, then brought himself to a stop. The MP-5 in his steady hands settled on the 4x4. Flame winked at the muzzle. Glass shattered as the windshield blew apart. The driver screamed as he caught a face full of razor fragments and 9 mm slugs. He twisted away from the windshield, losing control of the 4x4. It lurched to the right, jerking as the lack of control brought about a stall.

The pair of shooters were thrown off balance for seconds that cost them dearly.

Bolan raised the MP-5 as he stepped to the side, clearing the cab as the vehicle came to a dead stop. The shooters in the back reached out to steady themselves by grabbing the rail at the rear of the cab. It was Bolan's opening. He took it without pause, his weapon spitting triple bursts as he closed in on the vehicle. The closest shooter jerked and twitched as he caught a triple tap, the force of the slugs turning him sideways, so that Bolan's second burst hit him in the ribs, splintering bone and coring through to his heart. His partner scrambled to the far side of the truck and jumped to the ground, hauling his own submachine gun into position for a fast response once he saw his target. He failed to see Bolan drop to the concrete and angle his MP-5 beneath the 4x4. The Executioner tracked the shooter as

he moved the length of the truck, then triggered two 3-round bursts that shattered the man's ankles, dumping him screaming on the ground, blood squirting from his torn flesh and shattered bone. The shooter caught a quick glimpse of Bolan before the MP-5 crackled again and the shooter's head snapped back under the force of the 9 mm slugs.

Bolan yanked open the driver's door and hauled the body from the seat and climbed in. He dropped the MP-5 and dipped the clutch, turning the key to restart the stalled 4x4. As the engine burst into life Bolan put the vehicle into gear and slammed down on the gas pedal, sending the 4x4 into a rubber-scorching lurch forward. He spun the steering wheel and took the truck inside the barn, bringing it to a hard stop. Out of the cab he grabbed his weapon and some spare magazines, then stepped around to the side of the 4x4, crouched and raked the underside, puncturing the gas tank. Streams of gasoline began to spurt from the ragged holes. Bolan kept firing the MP-5 until the magazine was empty. The gas was spreading in a wide pool across the concrete floor of the barn.

Crossing to the desks Bolan searched the floor and found the lighter dropped by the first man he had shot. He scooped it up and ignited it. The lighter flared as Bolan turned up the butane. Bolan snatched up a discarded newspaper and formed it into a loose tube. He lit the paper and let it burn, then tossed the flaming torch into the spreading gasoline. Vapor caught the fire, sucking at it hungrily. It engulfed the 4x4 in a frantic surge, flame swelling up in a ravenous ball. Bolan retreated, snapping in a fresh magazine for the MP-5. He had just reached the door as the truck blew, the force of the blast slamming between his shoulders and almost knocking him off balance as he stumbled out into the cool of the rain.

Raised voices made him turn. Three armed figures were running in his direction. They opened fire the moment Bolan appeared, slugs hammering at the concrete. Bolan pulled back, flat against the wall of the barn, feeling the heat from the fire starting to penetrate the wood. He raised the MP-5 and tracked the closest of the approaching hostiles. He stroked the trigger and saw his target stumble. The man went down all the way when Bolan hit him with a second triple burst. The sight of their partner falling made the other two fall back, hesitating as they realized their own vulnerable positions. Bolan didn't hesitate. He put a burst into one of the men, the slugs tearing through his shoulder and spraying bloody bits of flesh and bone from the wound. The man dropped his weapon, clutching at his

shoulder. In his haste to get away he lost his footing and crashed headlong to the concrete. Bolan heard the crackle of automatic fire from the remaining man, felt the snap of slugs as they burned the air around him. He felt the shock of a hit as a bullet clipped his right side, just above the hip. The force knocked him off balance. Bolan forced himself to absorb the pain as he swung his MP-5 toward the shooter. He saw the man go down hard, his weapon discharging into the sky.

Clamping a hand over his bleeding hip Bolan straightened, turning to head back up the slope to his waiting car.

Behind him flames were flaring from between the wooden slats as the barn fire expanded. Bolan heard soft explosions from within the blazing structure and remembered the stored canisters and packed sacks. He had no idea what they might have held but they seemed to be reacting to the intense heat. He had almost reached the low fence when a powerful explosion rocked the ground under his feet. When he looked back over his shoulder he witnessed a series of blasts that threw spiraling geysers of flame into the sky, tearing out the barn roof. He maintained his retreat from the farm as the explosions continued, the fireballs arcing across the farm grounds, raining down on the main buildings and parked vehicles. Whatever had been stored in the barn was proving to be highly flammable and was creating chaos on the traffickers' base.

Bolan stumbled over the fence, going to his knees on the rain-sodden ground, a sudden weakness starting to spread over him. Reaction to the bullet wound. The hand over the flesh gouge in his side was leaking blood between his fingers. He felt the ground shudder as one of the arcing fireballs hit the earth just yards away, spreading a burning mass of liquid flame. *Too close*, Bolan decided. He struggled to his feet and made for the road.

A rain-soaked figure appeared, hands reaching out to support him. Bolan blinked his watery eyes and recognized the young woman from the barn. The one who spoke some English.

"I can help. Come."

She let him lean against her. She was stronger than she looked. One arm around his body she led Bolan across the road and down the slope to his parked SUV. The rest of the women were crouching down behind the vehicle. They watched Bolan with wary expressions, faces lit by the rising flames in the gray afternoon.

“We need to move away from here,” Bolan said, using his key to unlock the BMW. “Tell them to get in the vehicle. Now.”

Before the woman had time to answer something caught her eye and she gripped Bolan’s shoulder. “They come.”

Bolan swung around. Saw the approaching bulk of a big SUV. It was speeding up from the farm, bouncing over the rutted ground. It hit the concrete strip, swinging out from its direct path as it powered past the blazing barn.

“In the car,” he yelled, bringing the MP-5 on-line.

Bolan fought back the rising pain from the bullet gouge, ignored the blood still seeping from the wound, as he pushed up to road level, facing the oncoming bulk of the SUV. He saw a dark figure lean out from the side window and level a weapon. The muzzle flared briefly as the weapon crackled. The ill-judged volley went wide. Bolan stood his ground and returned fire from his static position, and as the heavy vehicle smashed through the flimsy perimeter fence, his burst clattered in through the grille and into the radiator. Raising his weapon Bolan hit the hood and the windshield. The glass failed to break, the slugs ricocheting off, leaving starred cracks. The effect made the driver haul on the wheel, the big tires squealing as they ground into the paved surface of the road. The SUV slid sideways, swinging dangerously close to Bolan as it came around. He threw himself out of harm’s way, the bulk of the vehicle missing him by inches before it righted itself and powered along the strip of the road.

Bolan tucked and rolled, biting back the flare of pain from his wounded hip as he slid across the rain-soaked ground. He scrambled to his knees, bringing the MP-5 back on track as the SUV jerked to a sliding stop, rear doors swinging open. Armed figures disgorged from the vehicle. Bolan opened fire before they had the chance to set themselves and caught one with a couple of tri-bursts that slammed him back against the open door. The man on Bolan’s blind side made it to the rear of the SUV, searching for a target. He walked into Bolan’s steady fire and went down with a harsh gurgle.

Bolan heard the roar of the SUV’s motor as the driver decided to gain some distance. He ran forward, raising the MP-5 to shoulder height, angling the muzzle, firing into the vehicle at window level. The side glass shattered as repeated bursts riddled the interior. The SUV made a brief forward jerk, then stalled, the motor dying. Bolan cleared the magazine, ejected it and felt

in a pocket for a fresh load. He clicked it in place. He jerked the weapon around as the driver's door clicked open. The driver slid sideways, pushing the door wide as he dropped from the seat onto the road, blood gleaming on his torn neck and from ragged wounds in his face and skull.

Bolan stood in the middle of the road, soaked from the heavy rain, hand clutched over his bloody side. The MP-5 dropped in his right hand. He didn't hear the woman step alongside. Only glanced around when she touched his arm.

"Now we go," she suggested.

Bolan stared at her.

"Before others come. Please."

He followed her back to the SUV. The other women were already crowded inside the vehicle. The woman slid onto the passenger seat and waited until Bolan climbed behind the wheel. He started the motor and got the SUV moving up out of the hollow and onto the road. He hit the wiper switch and the blades swept back and forth, clearing the rain from the windshield. As he followed the road on its curving path back to the main highway the farm came into view on their right. The blazing barn was in plain sight, other fires raging from the fallout created by the explosion of the material stored inside the building.

Beside Bolan the young woman, still clutching the pistol she had picked up, nodded to herself as she stared at the blaze.

Bolan kept the BMW rolling, slowing only when he reached the junction where the side road rejoined the main route. He swung the wheel and drove past the jam of vehicles starting to crowd the highway. Once he was clear Bolan increased his speed. Twice they saw emergency vehicles heading for the blaze site. Hugo Canfield's people were going to have to answer some serious questions once the police became involved. Bolan's hope was that the disruption to the trafficking operation would simply add more pressure to his actions. He was also aware that Canfield's involvement would be well camouflaged and any connection between himself and the operation would be hard to prove on a legal level.

Bolan's past experience had educated him in the complexities of the criminal mind-set. Men like Hugo Canfield operated on a different level. Distanced from the everyday exposure of his criminal activities by legal manipulation, the use of cover titles and companies operating under him but run by underlings. Canfield was far beyond the grasp of law enforcement.

He was able to make his profits by proxy. He allowed others to take the risks and the falls from grace. That was why the task force had not been able to reach him. Canfield simply sidestepped all their efforts, using the law and its complex infrastructure to protect him, while at the same time giving it the finger.

Now he had a different hunter on his trail. One who moved outside the restrictions of such laws. Mack Bolan used a simple logic. He saw the crimes. He identified the perpetrators. He did not stand idly by and do nothing.

Bolan considered the huddled group of young women in the SUV. They were the victims. Taken by force from the streets they called home. Transported to a strange place by men who saw them as nothing more than merchandise. Objects with a price over their heads, to be bartered for and sold into lives of deprivation and humiliation. The traffickers dealt in human souls, without any thought for the innocents they preyed upon. Human trafficking, in Bolan's eyes, was one of the most despicable crimes man had ever devised. There was something especially evil when men could take others of their kind and sell them like so much cattle, indifferent to the suffering they caused.

Hugo Canfield made vast amounts of money via this sickening business. He collected his payments from the people he sold to, enriching his already privileged life with increasing amounts. While he lounged in comfort the nameless victims were forced into degrading occupations, where any kind of resistance would be rewarded with violence. Their new masters looked upon their purchases as simply that—*purchases*—objects they could treat how they wished. The objects had no rights. No redress against the treatment they received, and there was nowhere for them to escape. Owned body and soul by their masters they found that the only relief they could expect came through obedience. Total, unquestioning obedience.

Venturer Exports existed because of the protective umbrella spread over it. A formation of powerful individuals who used their positions to hide the activities of the traffickers beneath complex covers. Favors and money fueled the actions of these protectors. Canfield knew his people and he lavished his bounty on them, sucking them into his circle. It was a self-perpetuating monster. One that demanded more from everyone involved. Any threat against the safety of the collective would bring powerful

responses because there was too much to lose. Money aside, there were reputations and careers to protect. The higher the profile the more they had to lose. Bolan had already witnessed the willingness of his enemies to hit back. As far as he was concerned the responses he was getting indicated his strikes were starting to bite.

He had no option but to maintain his offensive.

“I think we have company,” the young woman at his side said, her body twisted around in the seat as she peered through the BMW’s rear window.

Bolan checked his side mirror and spotted a big silver Mercedes barreling along behind them. It wasn’t so much the car but the aggressive way it was being driven that was alarming.

Bolan saw the vehicle accelerate. Silver spray misted behind it from the rain-slick road. It drew closer to the SUV. The driver was pushing to the limit. The thought of engaging on this busy strip of highway didn’t sit well with Bolan. He always did his best to avoid involving those he considered innocents. It was looking as if his opponents had no such scruples.

A figure leaned out from one of the car’s windows, a pistol in his hand. The shooter held his position for a while but was unable to gain a solid shot and finally pulled back inside the car.

“We can’t avoid them out here,” Bolan said to the woman. “Tell everyone to hang on.”

These mans don’t give up, he thought. Well, neither do I.

He jammed his foot hard down on the gas, sending the SUV surging forward. Peering through the streaked windshield he saw a sign ahead, indicating a right turn onto what appeared to be a construction site. Bolan hauled the wheel at the last moment, feeling the heavy SUV rock on its suspension as it fought gravity in the sudden turn. For a moment the rear wheels felt as if they were about to lose traction. They held and the SUV bumped over the edge of the paved highway onto a wide strip of hard packed earth made slippery by the falling rain.

Bolan checked out the way ahead. The muddy track opened out on a wide expanse of graded terrain. There were scattered items of heavy earth-moving vehicles. All of them sat motionless at the moment. To their left steel girders thrust up from concrete bases. Stacks of buildings materials dotted the site. All that was missing were the construction workers. They had quit for the day, or had been forced to quit because of the weather. Bolan didn’t fail to notice the pools of brown water that had gathered in the

ground hollows. Even with its high suspension and deep-treaded tires the SUV was finding the loose surface hard work. Glancing in his rearview mirror Bolan saw the Mercedes still in sight, but making its way over the muddy terrain.

Okay, Bolan decided, let's do it the hard way.

He gunned the engine, swinging the wheel around and faced back the way he had come.

Beside him the young woman gasped. "What are you doing? This is crazy."

"You could be right," Bolan said. "But it's been that way the past few days."

He aimed the big SUV directly at the Mercedes, arcs of mud spraying up from beneath his wheels. He saw the car slide to a stop, then start to flounder as it sank in brown mud, the driver giving in to panic as he tried to apply full power to the wheels. All he did was dig the car in deeper.

"You will hit them," the woman said.

"Maybe, but not with this," Bolan said, taking his foot off the gas pedal and pressing the brake.

The SUV slowed, sliding sideways as Bolan let go of the wheel. He grabbed the MP-5, shoved open his door and jumped out. The ground was soft, slippery, underfoot. He leaned against the side of the stalled SUV and worked his way to the front.

The driver of the Mercedes shouted something to his partners as he saw the black-clad figure emerge from the SUV. One of the back doors opened and Bolan saw a raised weapon. He shouldered the MP-5, tracked the shooter and hit him with a burst that shattered the door window before reaching the target. The man stumbled back, clutching at his punctured chest.

Bolan half turned and jacked out more bursts, this time aimed at the driver behind the windshield. It took a couple of assaults before the glass starred and imploded. The driver's hand flew off the wheel, a reflex action as he caught slugs and glass that tore the flesh of his throat and face. The car jerked to a sudden stop as the engine stalled. Bolan moved out from cover, closing in on the Mercedes. He had seen movement at the rear of the vehicle. The far-side rear door being pushed open. He flicked the selector to full auto and riddled the car with 9 mm death. He maintained his forward

motion, pausing only once to feed in a fresh magazine before continuing his attack. He took it to the logical conclusion.

The Executioner checked the interior of the car. The driver and the two men in the rear lay in bloody sprawls. The one man who had stepped out lay facedown in the mud.

Bolan turned back to the BMW, seeing the white, shocked faces of the young women pressed against the window glass. They watched him without saying a word as he climbed back inside, dropping the spent MP-5 on the floor. He started the engine and slowly drove back the way they had come until they reached the road again. He wasn't in a talkative mood himself. The wound in his hip was still hurting. He could feel warm blood drawing the blacksuit against his flesh. He should have done something about it but his main concern was getting the women as far away from the farm as possible. The authorities were going to have a great deal to sort out. It would keep them occupied for some time and he wanted to use that time to get well clear. At the earliest opportunity he needed to call Brognola again to have him liaise with the task force so the women could be taken care of.

Bolan needed to take some time for himself to deal with his wound, get some rest and prepare for the next phase of his operation.

It was time to leave Rotterdam and relocate to the U.K.

Hugo Canfield had his secondary operation there and that was the Executioner's next target.

He had a final request for Brognola. Bolan needed a flight out of Holland. One that would not involve him having to negotiate official channels. Bolan's Matt Cooper identity had been involved in too much action within Holland's borders. He wanted to get out quickly and quietly, and enter the U.K. in the same way.

11

Len Watts waited for the Executioner in a quiet pub in Pinner, a suburb of London. His appearance did not hint at his profession. Watts, a tall, athletically built man in his early forties, had the look of an academic. He wore beige corduroy slacks and a tweedy sports coat, an open-neck shirt and tan loafers. His dark hair was collar length. Yet his easy manner concealed the sharp mind of a man with his finger on the pulse of the covert world he worked in.

McCarter had given little away when he had sent along the details to Bolan concerning Watts. Reading between the lines Bolan's guess was that Len Watts not only provided ordnance, but knew how to use it, and most likely *had* used it.

Bolan showed up on time, parked the car he had rented and went into the pub. He spotted his man seated in a booth near the oak-beamed fireplace, identifying him from the photograph McCarter had sent over. Watts raised his pint glass in acknowledgment and Bolan joined him. There was a full pint of beer waiting for him.

Watts offered a hand as Bolan sat down. "I ordered a couple of ploughmen's," he said.

"Thanks," Bolan said. He took the glass and checked the beer. It was nicely chilled.

"So how is the old reprobate? Still a smart-arse?" Watts asked.

"You know him well, then?"

Watts chuckled. He took a swallow from his pint.

"Our relationship goes back a long way. Sometimes I think too long. But he and I have shared some hairy moments together." Watts paused as a server came with their food. Cheese, salad and pickle, with chunks of crusty fresh bread and rich butter. "Couple more pints, love."

They ate quietly for a while until Watts said, "I have what you asked for. It's outside in the boot of my car. When we leave I'll hand it over and

we can go on our merry ways. I imagine with what you asked for your way isn't about to be all that merry."

"Something that needs to be done," was all Bolan said.

Watts nodded. He studied Bolan's face, picking up on a couple of healing marks in evidence.

"Fell over my skis," Bolan said.

"I understand they can be pretty aggressive at times," Watts said straight-faced.

As they stood to leave Bolan hesitated as the bullet gouge in his hip reminded him it was still there. He noticed Watts had seen the pause.

"Skiing again? Maybe you should think of quitting."

"Problem is it becomes an addiction. Hard to give it up."

Watts went to the bar to pay the tab, then led Bolan out of the pub. He pointed to a gleaming maroon Jaguar parked at the far corner of the parking lot. Bolan went to his car and reversed out of his spot, then drove across to stop behind the Jaguar. Watts opened the trunk and took out a heavy black bag. He opened the rear door of Bolan's vehicle and placed it on the floor behind the driver's seat.

"Everything you asked for," he said. "The explosive packs are already fitted with timed detonators. Just set them where you need and the handheld unit will do the rest."

Bolan shook the man's hand. "Thanks."

"You watch your back. And next time you see my buddy tell him not to stay away too long. He's a pain but he's a good friend. And there aren't many of those left these days."

Bolan raised a hand as he drove away, turning the car along the quiet road. He circled the outer road system that bypassed London and made for the coast. He had a room booked in a hotel that was no more than an hour's drive from the South East Containers offices.

South East Containers was the company Paul Chambers ran. The same company he had seen delivering human cargo to the farm outside Rotterdam. The Executioner had an appointment with the freight company. Initially it would be to reconnoiter the setup so he knew what he was up against when he made his full strike.

12

South East Containers occupied a large site ten miles inland from the ferry port where its vehicles maintained their schedules to and from Rotterdam Port. The freight business sat in near isolation, the closest village some eight miles along the road that ran west to east along the coastal area. The area around the site was timbered grassland, with some wide-spaced farms in the distance.

The location was ideal for Bolan's initial observation of the setup. He parked off the road, deep in a stand of trees and heavy bush. Dressed in casual clothing, with binoculars and a camera around his neck, he was prepared to check out the freight business and pass himself off as an enthusiastic photographer if anyone asked.

He had parked a half mile from the site, making his way through the greenery until he was able to scan South East Containers from concealment.

The frontage comprised of an expansive spread of concrete that allowed the large rigs to pull safely off the road. Large metal gates gave access to the freight yard itself and the whole property was enclosed behind sturdy metal fencing. Bolan could see cameras mounted strategically along the top of the fencing. Next to the access gates was a front office that housed security men. Bolan spent long hours watching the activity as South East Containers vehicles came and went, each checked when they arrived and again when they left.

At the far end of the freight yard was a long warehouse building with loading ramps and a number of roller-shutter doors at the rear of each bay. A concrete island in the yard held a number of fuel pumps where the drivers could fill up their diesel tanks.

Over the two days and nights Bolan observed the activity, he saw that South East Containers closed for trading by eight every night. Rigs were parked in the yard, the drivers taking their own cars and driving away, leaving the security team to watch over the site. As darkness fell powerful

lights came into operation, covering the freight yard and the frontage. The cameras set on the metal fences rotated to cover both.

Bolan decided that if he was going to get into the freight yard and the warehouse the security facilities needed neutralizing first. And from what he had seen, the front office would be the place to start.

Day three was Saturday, and South East Containers closed for the weekend just after midday. Bolan watched the drivers park and leave in their own vehicles. He also saw the two security men hand over to a single man who arrived in a Land Rover. He parked inside the yard and they drove out. The gates were closed and the lone guard made his way into the site office.

Bolan saw the situation as his chance to make a closer inspection. It was necessary if he was going to carry out his planned strike.

He returned to his concealed car and drove back to his hotel, where he changed from his casual gear into a suit, complete with shirt, tie and polished shoes. Back in his car he returned to the South East Containers site, only this time he rolled his car off the road and across the concrete apron, parking. As Bolan stepped out of the car he could see the lone security man staring at him.

RAY KEPPLE FINISHED rolling his cigarette as he watched the tall, expensively dressed man climb out of the gleaming sedan and make his way across to the office. There was something about the man that aroused a nervous sensation in Kepple's stomach. He quickly stuck the thin cigarette between his lips and lit it, sucking smoke deep into his lungs.

The newcomer spotted him through the streaked office window and angled across to the door. He pushed it open, pausing in the frame. Kepple got an impression of a big man, physically fit under the suit. He had thick dark hair, his face tanned but showing some recent bruising. The eyes fixed on Kepple were of a startling blue, expressionless and cold. They unnerved Kepple.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

Bolan had seen the name badge pinned to the man's shirt. "Ray Kepple. The man I came to see."

Kepple realized the man was plainly an American, his tone firm without being aggressive.

“Yes. Who are you?”

“I’m the man about to get you out of trouble.”

“Eh?”

“You’ve heard about the problems in Rotterdam? Someone making a lot of noise? Upsetting business? It’s making Mr. Canfield nervous.”

Kepple rubbed the back of his neck, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. “Well, I don’t get involved in the operation over there. All I do is supervise things here.”

“From what the boss man told me you’re the main man here. Run this depot like clockwork. Keep the trucks moving on time and the merchandise turned around pretty fast.”

“Canfield said that?” Kepple gave a nervous grin. “I like to think I do my job efficiently.”

He didn’t have that much authority around the place but someone seemed to believe he had, so why spoil their illusions.

“It hasn’t gone unnoticed, Mr. Kepple. All the way to the top.”

It was not very often Kepple received any praise for his work.

“Hey, you want a cup of tea? Coffee? I know you Yanks...Americans... prefer coffee.”

“Yeah, why not, and the name’s Ryan.”

Kepple turned to the unit in the corner of the office where he kept the makings, switching on a plastic kettle. “Be a couple of minutes.”

Bolan had settled himself by the desk, leaning against it. He appeared relaxed, studying the layout of the office. “Quiet around here.”

“Oh, yeah,” Kepple said. “Weekend, see. We don’t operate weekends. Old traditions die hard in this part of the country. Half day Saturday. Sunday all day. Day of rest and all that stuff. We have to keep a low profile. Look suspicious to the locals if we didn’t. And we don’t want that, do we?”

“Hey, good thinking, Ray.”

Kepple handed the visitor a mug of black coffee. The American took it, sampling the strong brew.

“Sorry it’s instant. Don’t run to fresh roast hereabouts. Yes, I keep my eye on the place. I mean, there’s a lot of expensive vehicles back there in the yard. Mr. Chambers gets twitchy. Especially after all that bloody stuff in Holland. You understand.”

“One of the reasons I’ve been sent over. No disrespect, Mr. Kepple, but there’s a lot riding on keeping the operations running smooth. That’s my

job. Overseeing security. So I can report back to the man at the top and let him know he ain't got anything to worry about. If he's kept happy we can *all* be happy."

"Chambers said they're letting things cool for a while. No more shipments until we get the word again. Keep the place looking normal. No unnecessary activity."

"That's good," Bolan said. He placed his mug on the desk. "I need to let that cool. Now, you want to give me the guided tour? I can't see any problems here but we'd better do this right. You run a tight ship, Ray, I can see that." Kepple nodded. "Between you and me I just want to do my job and get back to London. Young lady waiting for me there and I wouldn't want to leave her standing, if you know what I mean."

"I understand."

"Look, just take me on a quick walk around the freight yard. I'll take a few pictures with my digital camera and report back when I get back to the city. Give you a good write-up."

Kepple stubbed out his cigarette, nodding enthusiastically. "Where do you want to start?"

"The yard is monitored? Cameras and stuff?"

"That's right."

Kepple led him through to the office, to another room where the security setup was housed. It was an air-conditioned control center where a bank of monitors relayed images from the freight yard. It was an expensive assembly.

"Digital cameras," Kepple explained. "Recorded so we can check back if we spot anything suspicious. Cameras are infrared so they can see in the dark. Bloody clever stuff."

"You said it, buddy. And you're the man in charge of all this? Impressive stuff, Ray."

"The freight yard is fenced all around. Steel embedded in concrete. There are even motion sensors on the gates and fences, so anyone trying to break in will set the alarms off. Now, in most cases the security system would be linked to the local cops. But it could prove embarrassing if they turned up and found *merchandise* on the premises. Chambers would go crazy if that happened. So would Canfield. We keep security in-house. If it's broken it's linked to the main office in London."

"Wise move, Ray."

Kepple led the way through a solid door at the back of the control center that opened on to the freight yard. The wide concrete area held a dozen of the distinctive South East Container rigs. All were locked. As they walked down the line of vehicles Bolan nodded his approval. He spent some time taking photographs with the compact camera he had produced from his suit jacket.

At the edge of the yard was the long, low-rise warehouse. "Your hospitality suite in there?" Bolan asked, grinning.

"Only ones who know are those involved in the business. Rest of the work staff are involved in packing and loading. We run a produce setup. Bring in stuff from Europe and ship throughout the U.K. The routine business, if you know what I mean. We have a five-star setup. Soundproof. Isolated. There's a false wall so that the day employees know nothing about it. The special deliveries are off-loaded at night when the day shift has gone."

He was warming to his subject now. Pleased to have someone around who seemed to appreciate what he did.

"Hell of a lot more fun than lugging crates of food around," the big American said.

"Well, I like to think of the merchandise as vegetables on legs," Kepple said, grinning expansively. "Expensive, but still bloody vegetables."

He wasn't looking at Bolan as he spoke, which was a good thing. If he had seen the ice-chip expression in the American's eyes he would have had doubts concerning his own life expectancy.

As they returned to the control room, Bolan walked beside Kepple.

"Great job you're doing here, Ray. When the big man gets my report he's liable to send you a bonus. I'm going to recommend that. I were you, though, I wouldn't let on to Chambers I said so. Don't want him grabbing all the glory when you're the man holding all this together. In fact Canfield said not to mention this visit to him at all. After what happened in Holland Chambers isn't what you'd call flavor of the month. You understand?"

"I know what you mean," Kepple said, inwardly pleased that Chambers was out of favor.

Bolan took a final look around, pretending to be suitably impressed. "If anyone did get in here could they disable the security system?" he asked.

"There's a master override that shuts the whole thing down, but it's in that box on the wall and it won't open unless I use my key."

“I hope you look after that key, Ray, my man.”

“Always have it with me.”

“So, you man the ship all night?”

“Today and Sunday. Never get any visitors over the weekend. Not even Chambers. He likes to live it up in London.”

“Doesn’t it get lonely?”

“I’m okay with that. I have my radio. That’s all I need. My shift ends at 6:00 a.m. Monday Day crew comes on then. Drivers arrive at seven. Then I get to go home. Nice long break.”

Back in the office Bolan picked up his mug and drank the rest of his coffee. He turned to Kepple and shook his hand. The American’s big hand swamped Kepple’s.

“Good job, Ray. I can tell the boss man things are running real smooth here. It’s important right now. Lot of money at stake so it’s reassuring to know the man in charge has it all tied down. You take it easy.”

Kepple watched the American return to his car and drive away. As the vehicle coasted along the straight, flat road he rolled himself another cigarette, lit it and sat back behind his desk.

He wondered if the man had been telling the truth about a bonus. It would be nice if he did get something. He would keep that to himself. If Chambers learned about it he would moan and bitch. The man was a mean bastard. Liked to believe he was the smart one. Maybe this time it wouldn’t be so.

Maybe this time it would be Ray Kepple who got the surprise.

13

Ray Kepple received his surprise far sooner than expected. And it was not in the form he had anticipated.

It came dressed in black. Armed. Carrying a heavy nylon bag, and made an appearance just after midnight.

Kepple, in the front office, had just fixed himself another mug of tea. From the control room behind him the plaintive wail of a female singer drifted through the open door. The lyrics told of her disappointment with her boyfriend who had run off with another woman, leaving her brokenhearted.

Give me ten minutes with you, love, and I'd change your mind, Kepple thought.

He chuckled at his own thoughts, picked up his steaming mug and crossed to the office door, unlocking it to step outside for a breath of fresh air. There was a full moon, casting pale light, and it was warm, surprisingly so for the late hour. Kepple knew he didn't make it any easier on himself with his constant smoking. The office reeked of stale tobacco. He had smoked since his fourteenth birthday, couldn't quit if he wanted to, but even he had to admit his habit did little to enhance the confined area in the office. He never smoked in the control room. He kept the place clean because Chambers would lose it if his precious, cutting-edge security system became tainted. And Kepple didn't like the chill, conditioned air. He had spent the past hour in the place, staring at monitors that never changed, and he decided he needed a mug of tea, a sandwich from his lunch box and a smoke.

He placed his mug on the office windowsill, pulled the makings from his pocket and proceeded to make a cigarette. As he wet the strip of paper something moved on his extreme left. It was only a fleeting shadow on the periphery of his vision. Kepple glanced in that direction and saw nothing but the sway of tall grass at the edge of the concrete apron near the road. He

shrugged and returned to his cigarette. About to light it Kepple felt certain he saw something again.

“Bloody hell, son, you’re jumping at shadows,” he said out loud.

He lit the cigarette and took a deep pull on it. A moment later the smoke caught in his throat and he almost choked, coughing harshly. The cold press of hard metal against the side of his head was the cause. Kepple didn’t need to be told what it was.

The muzzle of a gun was pressing hard enough to cause some discomfort.

“Ray, those cigarettes are not doing you any good,” a soft voice said. “Are you carrying a weapon?”

“A what? A gun? No.”

“Let’s go back inside.”

Kepple sucked frantically on the cigarette. He turned to walk back into the office. He stood just inside the office when he heard the door close and the lock click shut.

“Go sit down.”

Before he turned around Kepple’s suspicions were confirmed. He knew the voice.

Ryan.

The American who had visited him earlier. Supposedly one of Canfield’s people. The man was a fraud. Nothing to do with the company and he had checked out the set up simply for a return visit.

The suit was gone. Now the big American was dressed all in black. He had a large black nylon bag dangling from his left hand.

“You bastard,” Kepple said.

The American hefted the bag and dropped it on Kepple’s desk.

“We were getting on well last time I was here, Ray. I thought we had something going on.”

“I don’t like being made to look a bloody fool. Jesus, Chambers will tear my bloody heart out if I let you—”

The big man gestured with the pistol. “Empty your pockets. Everything on the desk.”

The Executioner watched Kepple turn out his pockets. He picked up the bunch of keys, weighing them in his hand.

“Sit down, Kepple.” All friendliness was gone. “I want you to pass along a message to Chambers and Canfield. It’s for both of them. Tell them

their time is running out. Tell them it might be easier if they took the quick way out, because when I'm done there isn't going to be a damn thing left."

Slumped in his chair Kepple wondered what the American had planned for him. He understood now what the earlier visit had been for. The man had been checking the place out prior to this return visit. Learning how the security system worked, finding out how long Kepple would be on his own. And he, fooled by the man, had shown him around the control center, telling him exactly how to immobilize the system.

Kepple knew something else. This man was Cooper, the one who had been wreaking havoc around Rotterdam.

Bolan pressed the muzzle of the pistol against the side of Kepple's skull. With his free hand he produced plastic ties from a pocket of his blacksuit.

"Hands behind you," he said.

Bolan made sure Kepple's hands were threaded through the wooden slats in the chair, looped one of the ties over his wrists and pulled it tight. Then he secured Kepple's ankles to the chair legs.

"Hey, my wrists hurt," Kepple protested.

Bolan stood back, holstering his pistol. When he looked down at Kepple his face was impassive.

"If you were one of your 'vegetables on legs' you wouldn't feel a thing. Isn't that what you tell yourself?"

Kepple stayed silent this time. He had decided his survival was in his own hands. Antagonizing this man would not be a wise move. There was nothing he could do, so he kept his mouth shut.

The Executioner picked up the bag and moved into the control room. He checked the bunch of keys and selected one. It didn't fit the wall box. Bolan tried two more before the lock turned. He opened the door and checked the internal panel. Simple enough. He threw the cancel switch. When he turned to check the monitor bank the screens were blank. He moved to the telephone connections and pulled the lines from the wall sockets.

Kepple had said that the security system was linked to the London office. It wouldn't take long for someone to realize the link had gone down. Once that was certified, action would be taken. Before that happened Bolan would be long gone.

He pushed open the control-center door leading into the freight yard. His targets were the parked rigs and the warehouse behind. Bolan wasted little time. He moved along the line of vehicles, attaching a Semtex block to the underside of each of the trucks.

As Len Watts had told him the Semtex blocks were fitted with electronic detonators that would respond to the handheld activation unit he carried. As each block was fixed Bolan pressed the small button that primed the detonator, a red light winking to show it was ready.

From the trucks Bolan made his way to the warehouse building. One of the keys from Kepple's bunch opened the small side door. It didn't take Bolan long to find the "hospitality suite" at the far end of the building, concealed behind its false wall. Inside he found primitive living quarters equipped with basic wooden cots. The front wall was built from steel bars with a single door set in it. The place hadn't been cleaned for some time and Bolan could only imagine how the captive occupants must have felt. He placed one of his blocks through the bars, sliding it across the floor, then as he worked his way back to the exit he laid down his remaining explosive blocks. The final pack was placed near the fuel pumps. Dropping the nylon bag Bolan returned to where he had started, across the freight yard and through to the office where Kepple was making halfhearted attempts to free himself.

"You can't fucking do this," Kepple yelled. "Don't you realize how big Canfield is? The man will—"

"If he's half as smart as everyone keeps telling me, he'll cut and run. But I don't think he is all that smart," Bolan said.

"You really think you can get away with this?"

"Let's see," Bolan said. He walked out of the office.

At the point where the concrete apron met the road Bolan took the handheld unit from his pocket. The first key he pressed powered the unit. The second activated the detonation units fixed to the Semtex blocks, and the third started the timers. Bolan had set them for four minutes. Enough for him to get well clear.

He'd parked his rental car a hundred yards down the road. The Executioner pulled on the jacket he had dropped on the seat, fired up the engine and swung the car around, starting his drive back toward his hotel. The roads were quiet. Bolan saw no other vehicles as he cruised steadily away from South East Containers.

The explosions rocked the countryside. They detonated almost in unison, some after a microsecond delay. Overall it was like a single, massive blast that rippled and echoed. Bright fireballs rose into the night sky, expanding and shooting fire and smoke into the sky. Bolan slowed, leaning out of his window to look back as the destruction of Canfield's fleet took place. He felt the aftershock of the explosions rock his vehicle. Seconds later he heard the patter of debris fall to earth. The rumble of the blasts went on for some time, fading as Bolan drove on.

He settled back in the seat, his mind already locked on to the next phase in his systematic takedown of Venturer Exports.

“Tell me something positive,” Hugo Canfield raged, facing the men sitting across the conference table. “I do not want an itemized list of the vehicles that were destroyed. Or an estimate of the damned cost.”

No one spoke because they had no positive input to deliver.

“One man. One fucking man. And he is making fools of us all. The operation in Holland has been severely compromised. Now our transport was blown to hell while we were sitting back doing nothing.”

From the end of the conference table someone spoke up. “Ray Kepple wasn’t injured...”

The speaker’s voice trailed off into an embarrassed silence as he realized the ineffectual content of his remark, and it became very quiet in the room.

“The fact that Kepple wasn’t injured tends to make me think he wasn’t doing his job properly. Think back to the fact that he took Cooper on a guided tour of the freight yard only hours before the bastard came back and blew it up.” Canfield slammed his hand down on the table. “How did that happen? Cooper just walks in and presents himself as part of our operation and Kepple falls for it. Someone please tell me where we get these people?”

“Chambers hired him,” one of Canfield’s lieutenants, a lean, eager-faced young man named Travis said. “Kepple oversaw the site on weekends.”

“Why is it every time I hear that name just lately I get a queasy feeling. It was Chambers who screwed up trying to take care of Cooper in Rotterdam. Now his operation here goes up in smoke. Tell me where that walking disaster is right now.”

“We, er, well, we can’t seem to locate him, sir,” Travis admitted. “He’s somewhere in the city.”

Canfield didn’t speak for a while, leaving the gathering in uncomfortable silence until Travis spoke up again.

“I’ll get some people on that right away, Mr. Canfield.”

Canfield cleared his throat. "Do that. When you get your hands on him I want him here. I want it done discreetly. Make him realize this isn't a request, it's a fucking order. And I also want Kepple taken care of. He is superfluous to requirements and stupidity of the degree he's shown requires stamping on. The thought crossed my mind that the local police may be conducting a detailed investigation and they might be liaising with that bloody task force. If Kepple sees an opportunity to make a deal he might decide to cooperate to save his own bloody skin." Canfield let the words sink in. "Are we clear on this? It only takes a small stone to create ever-widening ripples."

"Are we still going to slow operations down?" Travis asked.

"I'm debating that. This Cooper seems to be concentrating his attention on Europe and now the U.K. Until we sort out this mess I'm considering stopping our trade here. The U.S. and Asia haven't been targeted yet so let's maintain those areas."

In Canfield's mind he was hearing the message Cooper had instructed Kepple to pass along.

Tell Canfield his time is running low. He should take the easy way out.

He couldn't wipe it away and it irritated him.

"One more thing, sir," Travis said. "There is a shipment due to arrive from Thailand. On the *Orient Venturer*. It will dock tomorrow afternoon unless we act."

Canfield sat back, gently drumming his fingers on the conference table. "I need some time to decide on matters. This meeting is adjourned," he said while nodding at Travis.

Everyone stood and filed out. Travis got as far as the door before closing it and turning back into the office.

"Sit down, Clive," Canfield said. "Glad you mentioned that incoming shipment. I think we need to do something about it fairly quickly."

"It came to me, sir, that because of what this man Cooper has been doing, the authorities may be renewing their interest in our business. Even if we got word to our man in the local customs-and-excise division he might not be able to prevent the ship being searched."

"Precisely, Clive. Of course, if they did make a search and there was nothing but the regular cargo on board..."

"No special cargo, no proof."

"Pity to have to lose that consignment. The Thai girls are high earners."

Travis shrugged. "There's a plentiful supply, sir."

"Exactly."

Travis crossed to a framed map on the wall. He tapped it with his finger.

"Pretty deep water where the ship is right now."

"Wouldn't be the first time a container got lost at sea," Canfield said.

"No time like the present, sir," Travis said reaching for the satellite phone on the table. He tapped in a number and waited until the call was answered.

Canfield took the phone, acknowledging the identification of the ship's captain.

"Canfield," he said. "Are you running to schedule? Good. I heard you've had troubled waters. All clear now? That's fine, Captain Muren. I hope the rest of your trip goes well. Goodbye." Replacing the phone Canfield returned to sit behind his own desk. "Problem solved, Clive."

AFTER TRAVIS HAD GONE Canfield smiled to himself.

Troubled waters.

Two simple words. In this case it was a prearranged signal that told whoever received it to dispose of any special cargo they were carrying. Venturer Exports had used the order a number of times when unexpected problems came up. There were no exceptions to the rule. If a threat appeared and there was time to implement the command it was issued quickly. The loss of cargo, financially, was to be avoided if possible, but if circumstances deemed so it was put into action without further thought.

There's a plentiful supply, sir.

Travis had put it plain and simple. In Canfield's business the supply of human fodder was limitless—and so, too, were the customers.

Ray Kepple shook his head in frustration, trying to work out where the contents of the bottle had gone. He brought it closer, staring at it with blurred eyes. He couldn't recall having downed the half bottle so quickly. Despite his condition he decided that he must have drunk the stuff. The problem was he could remember *why* he had been drinking.

The freight yard and the warehouse. Those bloody awful explosions after the man called Cooper had gone, leaving him tied to his office chair. The blasts, seeming to go on forever, had destroyed the fleet of trucks and reduced the warehouse to rubble. The force of the blast had demolished most of the control center and had blown Kepple's chair, with him tied to it, across the office. He had lain there, stunned, clothing and skin scorched, deafened by the blasts, barely able to move. Following the explosions and the rain of debris falling back to earth there was a lot of smoke. It drifted into his office and Kepple could smell the acrid tang. As his hearing returned he picked up the crackling of flames.

Cooper had done a real number on the yard.

Kepple was able to see why the man had been so effective in Holland, running rings around everyone. He wasn't held back by rules and regulations. He chose his targets, checked them out and went directly for them. Not like the cops and their pals on the task force. Cooper, whoever he was, got results.

When Paul Chambers turned up to inspect the damage he had exploded with rage. His mood ranged from disbelief to incandescent fury. Ray Kepple was his main target. He blamed him for everything, including the weather. When Kepple pointed out that it had been Chambers's idea to keep the place low-key over the weekend the man almost lost it. He had to be careful because the police and fire crews were still around, poking and prying, asking questions. It had been a difficult time. Chambers had maintained that the explosions had been the work of a rival group who wanted to take over the business. The cops were skeptical, but when

Canfield's lawyers arrived, backed up by orders from on high, the local authorities had to back off. Canfield, as usual, had used his influence to have the investigation stalled. It wouldn't last forever, but any delay would give Canfield and his backers time to negotiate themselves out from under. Even so it was a nervous time for Chambers and Kepple.

Later, when they were alone, Chambers had turned on Kepple again. He raged back and forth, venting his anger, and continued his verbal attack on Kepple until the man, driven to fighting back, told Chambers what he and Canfield could do with his job if they didn't like what had happened. He delivered Cooper's message with relish, enjoying the look on Chambers's face. Then he walked away from Chambers with a final wild threat that suggested if anyone did come asking questions he might reveal just what South East Containers had been doing because he wasn't carrying the can for it all.

Chambers had worked out his rage, eventually retreating to his car and driving off, leaving Kepple to survey the damage before using his cell phone to summon a taxi to take him home. His vehicle had been destroyed in the explosion and Kepple didn't think he had much chance of getting Chambers or Canfield to replace it.

He questioned the wisdom of the outburst as he rode home, but his resolve to not be made the scapegoat for Cooper's attack stayed strong. Later, alone in his house, drinking heavily, Kepple admitted to himself he had been careless. Chambers would do his best to shrug off responsibility, leaving Kepple high and dry. Hugo Canfield worried Kepple more than Chambers. He had only met the man once when Chambers had brought him to look over the site. That had been enough. The man frightened him. He didn't like Canfield but he respected the man's power and influence. Someone like Ray Kepple was unimportant to Canfield. Simply an employee paid to do a fairly menial task in Canfield's eyes. And someone who could be disposed of without much concern.

Kepple sat up. He was sure he had heard a noise outside the house. Moments later he sank back in the armchair, waving a dismissive hand. He had imagined the noise. If he hadn't it was most likely a stray cat or dog nosing around the trash can. He decided another glass of whiskey would send all the noises away. Before he had time to fill his glass he heard the noise again, and this time he didn't dismiss it. He placed the bottle and glass aside and hauled himself up out of the chair, swaying unsteadily.

“Bloody strays,” he muttered, the words slurred. “I’ll fix you bastards.”

He stumbled toward the kitchen door, pushing it open and reaching for the light switch. As light flooded the kitchen Kepple realized two things.

The back door was open. And there was a dark-clad figure facing him.

Kepple’s vision was a little blurred but he felt sure he knew the man. He tried to focus. When he managed to bring the figure into sharp relief he saw he had been right. He did know the man.

Canfield’s minder. The one they called Sergeant Gantley. Ex-military copper. A big, powerful man. Broad across the shoulders and chest. Walked as though he was still on the drill field.

Gantley stood there and reminded Kepple of some immovable statue. He wore a black coat over a thick black sweater. And there were thin black leather gloves over his large fists.

“What are you doing here?” Kepple asked.

The question sounded superfluous. But Kepple didn’t want to admit he knew what Gantley was there for.

Kepple turned, seeking refuge away from the man. His alcoholic stupor slowed him.

Gantley, moving swiftly for a man of his size, reached out and caught hold of Kepple by the collar of his shirt. He pulled the wriggling, sobbing man to him, and spun him around.

Kepple didn’t even see the first blow coming. He just felt it as Gantley’s massive fist smashed into his face. The powerful blow drove his head back, knocking his skull against the door frame. The black-leathered fist began to repeatedly pummel Kepple’s face, crushing bone and tearing flesh. It didn’t stop until Kepple, unconscious, hung from his hand.

Gantley let Kepple fall to the kitchen floor, turning him over onto his stomach with his foot. Then he bent over the inert form, took Kepple’s head in his gloved hands and wrenched it savagely, hearing the neck snap.

When Gantley straightened up there was a contented smile on his face. It had been some time since he had killed a man with his bare hands. It was a satisfactory act for him. Any fool could kill with a gun or knife. He preferred this way. It still gave him a thrill.

Crossing the kitchen he rinsed the blood off his gloves under the faucet. Then he left the house by the kitchen door, closing it behind him. He returned to his car the same way he had approached the isolated house, crossing a field and walking through a small stand of trees. He climbed into

the car and drove away from Kepple's house, using only his side lights, along the quiet lane, following it until he reached the main road. Forty minutes later he merged with the freeway traffic heading in the direction of London. When he reached the city he drove directly to his apartment block. Inside he changed his clothes, throwing what he had worn into his washing machine and switched it on. While the clothes were washed Gantley made himself a mug of tea, into which he poured a generous slug of whiskey. He watched a couple of hours of TV, then turned in for the night.

WHEN HE ENTERED Hugo Canfield's office the following day, around noon, at the Canary Wharf headquarters, Gantley saw that his employer had a visitor.

Canfield glanced across the office, over Paul Chambers's shoulder, meeting Gantley's gaze. Gantley merely nodded. It was all Canfield needed in the way of explanation.

"Sergeant Gantley," he said, "would you have the car ready for me in ten minutes? I want to go direct to the airfield. Make sure the plane is ready for takeoff."

"Of course, sir."

Gantley stepped out of the office and closed the door, leaving Canfield to deal with Chambers.

As soon as Gantley closed the door Hugo Canfield picked up his conversation.

“When I said back off, Paul, I didn’t suggest taking everyone away and leaving the place wide open.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Chambers protested. “We always scale things down at weekends. It would have looked odd if there had been extra activity. The site was well covered by the security system. How was I to know Kepple would let that bastard just waltz in and take a look around? I mean, we hadn’t seen or heard from him since that last incident in Rotterdam. I figured he’d up and moved on.”

“Too bloody right, Paul. He moved on here. You made a bad call, don’t you think? Not the first you’ve made recently. Rotterdam. Bickell dead. The fucking farm. You handled it all carelessly. If Cooper had died the day he was supposed to we wouldn’t be having our current crop of problems. Kepple was your responsibility. You hired the man. Not me.”

“Now wait a damn minute. I hope you don’t hold me responsible for everything that went wrong over there. The farm getting hit, van Ryden, DeChambre. Bloody hell, Hugo, I’ll hold up my hands as far as Kepple is concerned but not for things that were nothing to do with me. I can’t be expected to be in every place at the same time.”

Chambers was almost shouting at the end of his protest, then saw the hard expression on Canfield’s face. He had gone a step too far.

Chambers became aware of the tense atmosphere in the room. He felt Canfield’s animosity toward him and the first feelings of apprehension began to make themselves known. In the past he had always felt comfortable being around Canfield, despite the man’s reputation. Canfield was all-powerful, almost arrogant in his dealings with others. That had never worried Paul Chambers. Since joining Venturer Exports his own standing had risen and he moved in wealthier circles, being introduced to a number of Canfield’s associates. Now, doubt manifested itself and

Chambers's nervousness showed as his hand trembled slightly, the contents in his glass shaking.

If Canfield noticed he said nothing as he crossed the room and refilled his own tumbler, savoring the aroma of the aged whiskey. In fact, he was enjoying the moment—letting Chambers sweat. The man deserved to be upset. His stupidity had cost the Organization dearly, and that was something Hugo Canfield could never forgive. It was bad enough they had lost cargo, money and facilities. With the multinational task force still hovering in the wings, just waiting to pounce, anything that drew their closer attention should have been avoided. Chambers had jeopardized Venturer Exports. He was going to have to pay for that.

“Hugo, let me put things right,” Chambers said in an attempt to smooth things over. “I made mistakes. I’ve lost out, as well. South East Containers was my business, too. How do you think I feel about that? I’ll make sure Kepple doesn’t get away with what he’s done.”

His words had the sound of desperation. Chambers was floundering. He was aware he had committed a grave error and was eager to try and make reparation. He had no chance of doing that. In purely financial terms the cost of replacing the truck fleet was far beyond his means. Canfield could have made good the loss, but that was not the problem. It was less about the money, more about the damage to Canfield’s reputation and his standing in the eyes of his influential friends. He would, of course, play down the events for his contacts. It would take some doing but Hugo Canfield was confident he could overcome the recent setbacks.

Chambers was another matter. His failure left Canfield only one course of action. Chambers could not be trusted any longer. The man had to be eliminated. Just as Kepple had been dealt with. More work for the dependable Sergeant Gantley. There, at least, was a man Canfield could depend on. There were never any doubts in Canfield’s mind once he sent Gantley out. His decision made he moved on mentally, turning his attention back to Chambers in order to dismiss the man.

“I need to consider how to handle things, Paul. I need to get to Banecreif. I’ll call you tomorrow. Go back to your apartment and stay put until you hear from me.”

The dismissal was final. Chambers knew not to argue. He emptied his glass and stood. Canfield was already concentrating on another piece of business, as if Chambers had already left the room.

In the elevator on his way to the ground floor Paul Chambers went over the meeting. He was left with no doubt that any decision Canfield made would not be pleasant—for Chambers.

Outside the building Chambers saw Canfield's Bentley parked close by. The solid figure of Gantley was standing beside the car. Chambers had always found the ex-military cop slightly menacing.

When Gantley caught Chambers's eye he inclined his head, watching closely. There was a hint of a knowing smile on his lips.

Chambers walked to his own car, searching for his keys and actually fumbling them from his pocket. He pressed the button that unlocked the door and slid behind the wheel, jamming the key in and firing up the engine. Without looking back he knew that Gantley was still watching. Chambers pushed the stick into first, let out the clutch too quickly and stalled, the car jumping. Swearing Chambers restarted the car, managing to pull away on the second attempt. He didn't let out a breath until the office block had vanished from sight among the other tall Canary Wharf buildings.

He had a twenty-minute drive across the city to his apartment and Chambers felt every minute of the trip. The sheer volume of traffic forced him to drive slowly, stopping and starting every few yards. He hated driving in London. The place was becoming gridlocked. Worse every time he visited.

Still a distance from his destination Chambers's in-car phone rang. He pressed the hands-free button.

"Yes?"

"Paul, it's Greg."

"If it's more bad news I'm not really interested."

"I think you need to hear this, Paul. It's about Ray Kepple."

"Kepple? What's he fucking done now? Burned down the village pub?"

"He's dead, Paul. Someone broke into his place last night and beat him to death. Really did a job on him. He was barely recognizable. Face was caved in. He actually died from having his neck snapped."

Chambers was driving on autopilot, his gaze fixed on the car in front. He was recalling Canfield's cold attitude toward him during their office meeting. The indifference. The curt dismissal. And then the glimpse of Gantley outside the building. The quiet look that spoke volumes.

Gantley.

Hugo Canfield's minder.

Gantley looked after Canfield and also handed out punishment to anyone stepping out of line.

Canfield would have wanted the ultimate price for Kepple's misconduct. Damn the man. He had allowed Chambers to ramble on about how he would discipline Kepple even while he had known Gantley had already done the job. And he hadn't even considered letting Chambers in on the matter.

"Paul, are you still there?"

The moment passed. Chambers took a breath.

"I heard, Greg. I don't suppose anyone saw or heard anything?"

"Nothing. Not surprising with Kepple living where he did. His closest neighbor was a quarter mile away."

"Local police handling it?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. We have to stay out of it. Let them screw around all they want."

Chambers severed the connection.

A cold sweat broke out on his forehead as he found himself reliving that moment when Gantley offered him that hint of a smile. He knew now exactly what it meant. Gantley had him on his list. Kepple's error had earned him a painful death. Now he was on the list. With everything falling down before his eyes Canfield was cleaning up loose ends. Making sure his surviving team was composed of strong people. He wanted the defaulters out of the picture. Weakness in one area could lead to weakness in others. Canfield would want to make sure there were no loose mouths left open.

The sound of someone hammering on a car horn startled Chambers. He snatched at the wheel and brought his car back into its own lane. He had let it wander. He hit the air-conditioning button, letting the cool air wash over his face. He realized his hands were shaking as they gripped the wheel.

Jesus, Paul, wake up. Clear your mind. Don't let the bastards do this to you, he told himself.

Chambers almost missed his apartment building. He had to stamp on the brake, causing other drivers to swerve and give him the finger as he ignored them and swung into the parking lot.

He went into the apartment building and took an elevator up to his floor. As he walked along the thickly carpeted corridor, the cathedral silence of the place made him even more nervous. He had never noticed before how

quiet the upper floor was. He looked back over his shoulder a couple of times, shaking his head when he realized what he had done.

Get a grip.

He slid the key into the lock and worked the handle. The door opened and he stepped inside. As the door swung shut behind him Chambers froze on the spot.

He was not alone.

He saw a tall figure, dressed in black pants and a leather jacket.

A lethal-looking auto pistol in his right hand was pointing at Chambers's heart.

"You were out, so I decided to stay around and wait," the man said. "I think you should sit down, Chambers. You don't look too well."

Paul Chambers decided his life was falling apart. The mistakes he had recently made, Canfield's loss of faith in him and the unspoken threat posed by Gantley—things could not get worse.

Then he realized he was wrong about that, too.

"I...How the hell did you get into my apartment?"

"You've got more important things to consider," the Executioner said.

Chambers paled at the implication behind Bolan's words. He looked around the room as if he had never been in it before, finally locating a chair. He sat down, rubbing a hand across his very dry mouth.

"What do you want? Haven't you already done enough?"

"You remember how this all started? You, me, in Rotterdam. The last thing you said to me was that I wouldn't get to see the sights. Wrong, Chambers. I've been seeing sights since then. None of them very pleasant. Innocent women and children caged up. Waiting to be sold like meat so you and your partners can turn a tidy profit. So scum like you can stay in an apartment like this. Must make you feel all warm inside."

"It's a business. We supply a hungry market, Cooper. And it's growing. What makes you think *you* can shut it all down?"

"You'll have to wait and see about that."

"So what do you want from me?" Chambers's growing fear spilled over, his voice rising to a high shrill sound. "Damn you, Cooper, your fucking hits against us have put me in the firing line. Canfield has more or less hinted I'm on my way out. He holds me responsible. Remember Kepple? Canfield had him killed. He sent his trained dog, Gantley, to beat Kepple to a pulp, then snap his neck. And it looks like I could be next. Gantley will be coming after me. Canfield is launching a tidy-up campaign. Cutting out what he thinks is dead wood..."

Bolan's face remained impassive. Whatever trouble Chambers had got himself into made little difference to the Executioner. His business pushed him outside the limits for redemption. There was no get-out clause for a

man like Paul Chambers. By the very nature of his employment he was already in Bolan's sights.

"Look, I can give you information. But I want protection. I don't give a bloody damn what you think of me. I want to survive. We can trade," Chambers pleaded.

"Trade what?"

"Canfield is moving into something different. To add to his business dealings. A new venture."

"I don't expect it to be legal," Bolan said.

"Drugs. He's struck a deal with a Russian supplier. Opium from Afghanistan. Had a big consignment delivered a few days ago to his place up in Scotland."

"Where?"

"Canfield has an old house. Massive place. Pretty isolated. Up on the northeast coast. House is called Banecreif." Chambers rubbed his dry mouth. "I need a drink."

Bolan gestured in the direction of the bottles on a side table. Chambers picked up a whiskey and splashed it into a glass. He swallowed the contents in a single gulp and immediately poured a second.

"Well? Do we have a deal?"

"I'll let you know when we're in sight of Banecreif," Bolan said.

Chambers laughed and downed his second whiskey.

"You actually think I'm going to Scotland with you in tow? I might be desperate but I'm not suicidal."

"And do I look like I just came off the farm? Your choice, Chambers. You're my point man on this, or I walk out that door and you're on your own."

Chambers did some fast thinking. At least with Cooper at his side he might have a chance of staying alive. On his own, with Gantley hunting him, he had little chance. Paul Chambers had never considered himself a capable man in a fight. He always paid others to work violence for him and watch his back. Like it or not, the tall American holding the gun would seem the most likely man to prevent anything happening to him, and if Cooper managed to put Canfield down Chambers could take his chances. It wasn't foolproof but it was better than being on his own and waiting for Gantley to show, because sooner or later Canfield's trained dog would slip his leash and come looking.

“Okay, Cooper. I can’t say it’s what I’d choose if I had any other options. Only I don’t. So we go together.”

AN HOUR LATER Bolan accompanied Paul Chambers from his apartment. They picked up the rental car Bolan had left in the parking garage and drove across the city to London’s Euston Station where they boarded the train that would take them to Scotland. The train would terminate in Glasgow and Bolan would pick up another that ran up country, his destination the far northeast of Scotland, taking him closer to Canfield’s remote lair.

As they settled in the private compartment Bolan had requested when he had booked their passage, the Executioner was aware of his companion’s nervous condition.

“Chambers, sit down and relax.”

“Easy for you to say. Christ, I’m a walking dead man. That bastard wants me buried. If Gantley is looking for me the far north of Tibet won’t be far enough away.”

Bolan stowed his bag on the overhead luggage rack. He wasn’t happy having to walk around with a cache of weapons but the situation called for extreme actions. Heading for Hugo Canfield’s base he was not going in empty-handed.

“Right now we’re ahead of the game. If we can stay that way there’s a chance we might come through,” he told Chambers.

“That’s bloody pessimistic. ‘Might come through?’”

“It’s called being realistic. I don’t guarantee anything, Chambers. Every situation like this comes with a fifty-fifty chance of survival. I accept that.”

“Maybe you do. I figure those to be poor odds. Why the hell should I be in a mess like that?”

Bolan moved so fast Chambers had no chance to step aside. He felt a big hand close on his shirtfront. Bolan slammed him up against the compartment wall, the impact making Chambers gasp for breath. He found himself staring directly into chilled blue eyes.

“Quick to forget what you’re involved in? Chambers, you trade in human lives. You buy and sell women and kids. Send them into virtual slavery. Into lives of sheer misery. The money in your wallet comes from the depravity some of those people have to endure. One of your own kind

has turned on you and now you expect sympathy. Are you expecting me to forget what you do and hold your hand? Be thankful I don't pull out my gun and put a bullet through your head. Now sit down and shut up."

Bolan released his hold, allowing Chambers to shrink away from him. Chambers moved to one of the seats and pressed himself into the corner, staring out the window in cowed silence.

"THEY'RE ON A TRAIN for Glasgow," Canfield's man said from a pay phone at Euston Station. "I sent Breck and Munro after them. If they get the opportunity Cooper and Chambers won't even reach the Scottish border."

"If they do, at least we know they're coming," Gantley said. "Keep me informed, Harris."

Gantley put down the phone and turned to Canfield.

"Cooper's on his way. He's got Chambers with him, sir. They left London on a train for Glasgow. Breck and Munro are on board, as well. They might get the chance to intercept and deal with them."

"Hopefully we could be spared the need to expect them showing up here. If they *do* survive it still gives us time to arrange a welcome for them. Sergeant Gantley, don't bother to get any rooms ready. Cooper won't be staying long."

"Just a quick visit, then, sir?"

Canfield smiled.

"Very brief. Painful and brief. Especially for Chambers. Didn't take him long to change sides."

"I should have got to him sooner, sir. Before he could open his mouth to Cooper."

"One way or another Mr. Paul Chambers is going to find it's a very small world, Sergeant Gantley. One where he can't run away and hide."

"Yes, sir."

The ex-military cop finished pouring the whiskey. He sealed the bottle and placed it back on the wet bar. Without a word he placed the tumbler within Canfield's reach and left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

Canfield picked up the tumbler, raised it to drink, then paused. His gaze turned hard, eyes gleaming as he struggled with the turmoil inside his head. Too much was happening that was causing him aggravation. When he'd

retreated to Banecreif he expected a calm and restful time. Canfield hurled the thick tumbler into the wide stone fireplace. The glass shattered and the whiskey flared as the flames engulfed it.

“Damn you to bloody hell, Cooper,” he said. “Damn you for making me feel like this in my own house.”

On his feet he strode to the glass-fronted gun cabinet. He opened the doors and reached for a racked Franchi-SPAS shotgun. The weapon, customized for him in London, was finely balanced. The SPAS was a formidable tool in Canfield’s expert hands. He liked hunting with the shotgun even though it was not primarily a sporting gun. When he turned it on either Cooper or Chambers there would be no hint of sport in his actions. This time around his targets would have a special significance.

He wanted the pair dead and buried and he cherished the hope that they actually got through to Banecreif. If his men on the train failed to stop them, Canfield could look forward to handling the matter himself.

Especially Cooper, the man responsible for so much death and destruction. He was the reason for the fragmenting of Hugo Canfield’s organized and well-oiled machine. Because of Cooper, Canfield had lost merchandise, money and people. His reputation had been tarnished and so had his credibility. If the news spread to his potential new partners it might sour their decision to do business with him. Canfield understood how they might view the attacks on Venturer Exports. The drug business thrived on being able to move its products around with comparative ease, taking any small losses without suffering too badly. The fact Canfield was under the eye of a multination task force looking into his trafficking might not bother them. The blatant strikes against him by Cooper, who ignored the restraints placed on a lawful investigation, might easily do more to scare them off.

The problem was Canfield’s and Canfield’s alone. He needed to clean up his own mess. Prove to his future partners that Hugo Canfield was capable of maintaining order. Only he could solve it, and solving it meant getting rid of Cooper. The man’s sheer audacity was bringing him here to Banecreif. Canfield saw that as Cooper’s mistake. If he did survive the rail trip he would be on Canfield’s home ground. Here he was the master. His knowledge of Banecreif and the surrounding terrain was indisputable. That gave Canfield the advantage. He would use it to the limit.

And this time Cooper would not walk away so easily.

In fact, he wouldn’t walk away at all.

Breck waited for his partner to join him in the buffet car. He handed Munro the cup of coffee he'd ordered. Munro ignored his partner while he blew air across the steaming surface of the drink. It was one of his partner's habits that annoyed Breck. He held back from saying anything because it would only encourage Munro to continue doing it.

"Aren't you going to ask me if I found 'em?" Munro asked abruptly. There was a thin smile on his lips. "Pay attention, son, or life is goin' to pass you by."

They had each taken one end of the train, working their way back to the central point, that being the buffet car. Breck had seen no sign of Cooper or Chambers. The smug expression on Munro's lean face suggested he had been successful.

"Have you found them?"

Munro took a mouthful of coffee, nodding. He led Breck away from the counter to avoid being overheard. "Third carriage along. Compartment 12B. Easy as that."

Breck glanced out the window behind him. "Be dark in a couple of hours. Reckon we should wait until then?"

"About right. What do you think? Take 'em down and dump 'em off the train while it's still dark?"

"Makes sense to me."

"That Yank will be armed," Munro said. "And he's not slow to use his gun from what I heard."

"So we'll be careful. Here, you're not going soft on me, are you?"

"Like I would. Anyhow, what sort of a question is that to ask?"

"Since you started going around with that skirt from the club I reckon you have."

Munro wagged a finger at his partner, grinning widely. "Jealous. You are bleedin' jealous, Marty Breck." He swallowed more coffee. "She never

did fancy you. Thought you were too rough for her. She prefers the sensitive type like me.”

“Says who?”

“Who is she with, partner? Need I say more?”

Breck shrugged as he reached into his jacket and took out his cell phone. “Better let Gantley know we spotted them.”

He spoke quietly when his call was answered, finally completing his conversation. He shut the cell and put it away. “Same as before. If the chance comes up we do it. If not we stay on their tail until they reach Banecreif.”

“Never been to Scotland,” Munro said.

“Sheltered life, son. You need to get out of the smoke more often.”

“Right now I fancy a meal. There’s a proper restaurant car back that way. Help pass the time.”

“Very smart, Sherlock. And what if Cooper and Chambers decide to do the same? Chambers knows us.”

Munro accepted the fact grudgingly. “Well, they do sandwiches here. What do you fancy? Chicken? Chicken with salad. Or they do a nice chicken with chicken.”

“Just get something, huh?” Breck glanced at his watch. It was going to be a long wait.

NEITHER COOPER NOR Chambers left their compartment. Food had been ordered and was delivered to the door. On watch farther down the car Breck saw an opportunity to get them inside the compartment. Give Cooper and Chambers ample time to eat their meal before they moved. He returned to the buffet car and an increasingly fidgety Munro.

“It’s getting dark, Marty,” he said. “Time to move?”

“We give ’em a couple more hours. I just saw food being delivered. Let them eat, then we go. Wait until things quiet down.”

“That’s generous of you.”

“No. It gets us a way into that compartment. Knock on the door and say we’ve come to collect the tray. They open up and we go in hard and fast.”

Munro peeled open his sandwich and studied the contents. “Does that look like chicken to you?”

“A couple of hours. We take turns to watch the compartment in case the waiter turns up first. Now eat your bloody sandwich.”

IT WAS DARK BEYOND the train windows. No one had gone near the compartment. Breck joined his partner and they made their way along the corridor to 12B. From inside their jackets they pulled out the suppressed 9 mm Glock pistols they carried in shoulder rigs.

“Nice sharp knock,” Breck said.

Munro nodded, rapping on the door.

“Restaurant service, sir,” Breck said. “Come to collect your tray.”

The door clicked after a few seconds. It opened. Paul Chambers stood there. As he recognized the two men he put out a hand as if to ward off any threat.

“No way,” he shouted.

“Hey, Paul,” Munro said and stepped inside the compartment, his Glock already rising.

Breck tried to warn his reckless partner but he was too late. Sudden movement from just behind the door caught Munro off guard. The dark outline of a fast-moving figure loomed over him. An arm swept down. Munro gave a strangled cry as the solid metal of a pistol smashed across the back of his skull with tremendous force. He stumbled across the compartment, out of control, slamming into the far wall.

Already committed Breck followed his partner over the threshold, aware of the threat behind the door. He moved fast, starting to crouch, angling his Glock to punch a round through the panel. His intention might have been sound, but the execution was not fast enough. The door was driven at him, catching his shoulder, driving him off balance. He hit the compartment floor, the Glock firing as his finger jerked the trigger. Breck rolled, desperation leading his frantic moves. He heard the compartment door slam shut, caught a blurred glimpse of an armed figure. He dragged the seemingly reluctant Glock around to take a shot. He never made it. The muzzle of the other man’s pistol winked brightly—once, then again. Breck felt the impact of the pair of slugs as they cored into his chest. The force at close range slammed him to the floor, his arms spread wide as he sucked in air, struggling against the lethargy that was drawing him into a silent and shadowed place.

BOLAN STEPPED BACK, still gripping the Beretta 93-R Len Watts had supplied. It was as if a blanket of silence had cocooned the compartment and it stayed that way until he let out the breath he'd been holding.

Reality rushed back. He could feel the rhythmic cadence of the speeding train. The occasional creak of metal from the gentle sway of the car. Bolan backed across the compartment, moving the Beretta to cover everyone.

That was when he saw Chambers. The man was crumpled in a corner of the compartment, limbs twisted awkwardly. The loose bullet from Breck's pistol had blown in through his left eye and angled up to erupt from the top of his skull.

The Executioner collected the Glocks the intruders had carried and dropped them in his bag, along with the spare magazines they had. He knew from past experience that adding to his arsenal was recommended.

His only choice was to leave the train at the earliest opportunity and make alternative travel plans. It wouldn't be the first time he had been forced to rethink a mission. Flexibility in these situations was often necessary. Bolan had made such moves on many occasions before.

He secured his bag by its long strap, swinging it across his back. The Beretta was back in its holster beneath his zipped leather jacket. He opened the compartment door and checked that the corridor was clear. He made his way along until he reached the end. At the junction where the car joined the next one there was an exit door set in the side. Bolan waited until he felt the train start to reduce speed. It was making the pull up one of the long gradients as it coasted through the Scottish lowlands. Working the door release Bolan eased it open until the gap was wide enough for him to push through. He used the grab rail set in the car side, searching for the foot step, and swung clear of the door, slamming it shut once he was secure.

The chill draft caused by the train's motion buffeted him and pulled at his clothing. Bolan hung on to the grab rail, thinking how well it had been named. He peered around. There was enough illumination coming from the train's windows and from the pale moon to show him the terrain. From the tracks the ground fell away in a long grassy slope. Some way ahead he could see clusters of lights, indicating some habitation. A town. That meant people and maybe the chance to gain some kind of transportation.

The sudden shriek of the train's whistle sounded. Following that, the train's speed reduced more. Bolan checked out the slope some feet below his level. It still seemed to be moving by at a good speed but he figured it wasn't going to get better. He was about to take a calculated risk. One that might leave him injured. If he decided to stay on the train he could find himself in the hands of the authorities and, if Canfield learned about it, the

man's influence would be asserted. His contacts would home in on Bolan and freedom might become a thing of the past.

As the train reached midpoint along the gradient its speed dropped down another notch. Bolan swung around so he faced the direction the train was moving. He waited for the clearest patch of slope and went for it. He pushed out from the step, relaxing his body and hit the soft surface of the slope with enough momentum to hurl him forward. His feet made contact. He let himself go, loose limbed, skidding across the grassy slope. He slammed facedown, his arms crossed to protect it.

The hard shock stunned him and he was barely aware of being flung downslope. The hard contents of the bag dug into his chest and ribs as he bounced and slithered across the face of the slope.

His wild ride came to a dead stop as Bolan slammed into a thick tangle of thorny bushes. He didn't attempt to move until his senses settled. The first thing he did was check his arms and legs. Then he sat up and dropped the bag. Bolan stood slowly, turning to check out the train. He could still see the faint glow of lights as it continued up the gradient.

The sooner he started to move, the better. Walking would help keep his battered body from stiffening up. He checked out his surroundings. The lights he had seen from the train were slightly west of his position, a couple of miles away. Bolan spotted moving lights below him—vehicles on a road a quarter of a mile distant. Bolan brushed himself off, slung the bag over his shoulder and headed in the direction of the road.

IT WAS CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT when Bolan closed the door of the room he had taken at the roadside lodge. The lodge was the U.K. equivalent of a motel, there to provide accommodation for long-distance travelers. The young man on duty at the desk had processed Bolan's request for a room with barely any interest. He was eager to get back to his viewing the international soccer match on the television set in his cubbyhole behind the desk.

"You have a car?" the young man asked in a Scottish dialect strong enough to almost baffle Bolan.

"No. Local sales man dropped me off. He'll pick me up in the morning. We had a long day."

"So haven't we all." Bolan's key card was slid across the desk. "Straight along the corridor. Room fourteen. You take your breakfast at the diner

across the way. It's in the price."

Bolan nodded, but the man had already turned back to his TV, absorbed in the droning reflections from the commentator and his group of former players as they analyzed the match.

The room was comfortable and functional, equipped with a TV and a kettle for making hot drinks from the supply on a sectioned plastic tray. Bolan flipped the switch. As the water boiled he crossed to the room and closed the curtains. He checked the bathroom. The shower beckoned. Bolan made himself a mug of instant coffee, sitting on the edge of the bed as he drank it. He stripped off his clothes and padded into the bathroom. He caught his reflection in the mirror over the sink. His torso was crisscrossed with bruises and the still-healing bullet tear. He had half expected it to start bleeding again. He counted himself lucky that his leap from the train had let him off so lightly. Bolan turned on the shower and stood under the hot water. He soaped himself, then leaned against the tiled wall and let the water ease away some of the aches and pains.

His strike against Canfield's home base would still go ahead. It would take him longer to reach the place, but that might work in his favor. Anticipation of the coming attack would play against Canfield. He might lose some of his confidence. Start to doubt his own safety as he debated where and when Bolan would show. It was a strategy that could give the Executioner an edge. Anything that took the edge off Canfield's force was welcome. Bolan had no idea of the strength of Canfield's security. He was going in blind. It didn't worry him too much. It wouldn't be the first time he had gone up against an unknown force. He had the advantage of time on his side.

Out of the shower Bolan dried himself and wrapped a towel around his waist. He prepared another coffee, stretched out on the bed and checked his phone. He saw the power was in need of charging, so he took the unit from his bag and clicked in place the converter that would allow him to use the U.K. socket. He connected to the cell phone, saw the power indicator rise and hit the speed dial that would link him to Hal Brognola.

"Striker, where are you?"

"A long way from home," Bolan said.

"How close are you to wrapping this up?"

"Close enough. You got anything for me?"

Brognola held back for a moment.

“Good news and bad news,” he said. “On the bad side there’s no way of making it any easier to say.”

“Just say it, Hal.”

“A ship on its way to the U.K., the *Orient Venturer*, dumped one of its containers over the side. They didn’t know they’d been spotted by a trawler out of a British port. The trawler hove to where the container had been dropped and marked it with a buoy. A British Navy vessel was called and it sent down diving teams to locate the container. When they raised it and got it open they found twenty-five bodies inside. Young women and kids. Later identified as Thai. The call went out and the authorities were waiting when the container ship docked. Captain and crew were arrested. No one will talk but we lucked out when the Bear did some hard probing into the container ship’s background. This is the good news. Aaron found one hell of a maze as far as ownership was concerned. Blind alleys and phony registration. But bless that man, he finally pinned it down. Bottom line is that the *Orient Venturer* belongs to Hugo Canfield’s organization. He can deny it until hell freezes over but he’s the man.”

Brognola sensed Bolan’s feelings through the protracted silence that followed his revelation. He let Bolan have his moment, knowing how the man would be hurting. If emotion was ever allowed to break Bolan’s stoic image, it could be guaranteed when he was faced with more innocent suffering. The facts about the women and children would hurt Bolan more than a 9 mm bullet.

“Hal, how far has this information gone?”

“I haven’t spoken to anyone.”

“Leave it that way. We started this mission one-to-one. I’ll finish it that way.”

“No problem. A little more feedback. Aaron’s digging into the data he downloaded from van Ryden’s computer has paid off, too. Names on Canfield’s payroll. High rollers in government positions. Customs. Police. Canfield has connections. Those names covered individuals in Europe, the U.K. and the U.S. Looks like van Ryden was hedging his bets by keeping lists. Covering his ass in case he needed protection himself. That’s a lawyer for you. The task force will be drooling for weeks when they get their hands on that intel.”

“Tell Aaron nice work.”

“I’ll hold back on this until I hear from you,” Brognola said. “I guess Canfield is in for a surprise when you show up.”

“That’s the idea, Hal.”

Banecreif was more than five hundred years old—a sprawling stone mansion with extensive grounds. Isolated—the closest village was over ten miles away—it stood on the coast, the east side of the massive building overlooking the cold gray waters of the North Sea. From the base of the east wall a sheer rock cliff dropped eighty feet to the inhospitable waters.

Since he'd purchased the house Hugo Canfield had invested a great deal of money in the place. He added modern refinements. A powerful generator supplied electricity to light the house and provide heated water for the bathrooms he had built. The kitchen was equipped with professional stoves and freezers. There was no permanent staff. When Canfield was away a local couple kept the house running. If he was expecting business guests he flew in catering staff.

With the current situation Canfield had Sergeant Gantley, plus a five-man security team at the house. His personal helicopter had brought them to Banecreif from the closest airfield. It was standing on the concrete landing pad next to the house.

Sergeant Gantley looked after security and supervised the kitchen. One of the ground-level rooms served as a small but efficient control center. From there it was possible to view the incoming images from a number of security cameras that had been installed around the property. Total security systems had yet to be completed, with motion sensors and infrared detection still to be added. Fortunately the house was far enough off the beaten track not to attract many visitors. Canfield maintained a low profile when he was at the house and his roving patrols were enough to keep any unwitting trespassers away.

Hugo Canfield always felt secure at Banecreif. The peace and quiet allowed him time to think out his problems and plan future enterprises. He had installed expensive communications systems—satellite phone lines, high-speed Internet. Distance was no problem. He could speak to anyone he wanted, anywhere across the globe.

He was on the phone to his Russian contact in Leningrad. Pavel Molenski was head of the drug syndicate Canfield was hoping to do business with.

The conversation was not going well.

"Hugo, I hope you are keeping well? I have heard life is a little difficult at the moment."

"A few local problems, Pavel. Nothing to worry about."

"But that *is* the problem, Hugo. Friends are concerned. Questions have been asked. About your suitability to join us. And as much as I admire your past record, these recent setbacks are starting to give me reason to doubt."

"No need, Pavel. As I said this is a local disturbance. One that I will settle very soon."

"First your setup in Holland. Now your U.K. base. My sources tell me that your organization has been severely hit."

"Nothing that cannot be brought back on-line. Trust me, Pavel, I won't allow this interference to put our deal at risk."

Pavel's strong Russian accent came through clearly. "It has been decided, Hugo, to give you exactly one more week. If nothing has changed by then, if you have not completely cleared up this mess, we will be expecting the return of our merchandise and all future deals will be off."

"Don't do this to me, Pavel. Not now. I've made commitments to my contacts here. I can't renege on my promises."

"Understand me, Hugo. You made a commitment to *us*. We supplied the merchandise. It seems clear that you will not be able to go through with your end of the deal. We have to protect our interests. If you are compromised we could be drawn into the area of suspicion. One week, Hugo, then we collect our goods. And we can do it peacefully, or with extreme force. Please do not make it that we need to use force. That would be extremely foolish on your part."

The phone went dead. Canfield listened to the buzz of the line. He experienced a growing anger as he recalled the Russian's words. The implicit threat.

"The hell with you, Pavel."

He slammed the phone down and strode across the room, standing in front of the blazing fire in the ornate stone hearth. Canfield stared into flames, his thoughts working overtime. First Cooper. Now the fucking Russians. Whining because they were scared their consignment of drugs,

stored in the temperature-controlled cellars beneath Banecreif, was going to be lost. Crying like babies who wanted their toys back. They were pathetic. They were greedy. Wanting everything instantly. Suddenly they were acting as if they were the top dogs. Pushing into every corner of his business. Uneducated, nonthinking thugs. Maybe he had been wrong to negotiate the deal. It was a mistake on his part. They were going to have to wait until he had the Cooper affair handled. Then *he* would show them how negotiate.

He heard a clock chiming at the far end of the large room that served as his office. Canfield turned and crossed to the oak desk and sat down in the huge leather chair. He reached for the internal phone and called for Sergeant Gantley to join him.

The ex-Army cop was there in minutes. He was an imposing figure in his dark military-style fatigues. He carried a SIG-Sauer P-226 in a high-ride holster on his right hip. The pistol, with its stainless-steel parts and wood grips, was Gantley's personal weapon.

"Any sign of Cooper?" Canfield asked.

Gantley shook his head. He had his security detail on roving patrols in and around the massive old house. "Nothing from Breck or Munro, either, sir. I'm trying to get in touch with Harris," Gantley said. "Maybe he can give me an update."

"I've just been speaking to Pavel," Canfield said. "He had the nerve to actually threaten me. This Cooper mess has those Russians wetting their pants. He's ready to go back on the deal. Told me we have a week to sort this out, or they'll demand the drugs back."

"Russians? They couldn't even keep their own country together, sir. Now they all think they're Al Capone. Never met one I couldn't drink under the table, sir."

"Just thought I'd let you know, Sergeant Gantley. First things first. We deal with Cooper, then sort out these bloody Russkies."

"Yes, sir."

GANTLEY MADE THE ROUNDS, checking his team. They were well armed. Two outside. Two more on the roof and one manning the security room, watching the camera monitor screens. Each man was carrying a holstered Beretta 92-F and an HK MP-5A4. The long-established submachine gun

still performed well and Gantley trusted the weapon. The MP-5s were loaded with 30-round twin magazines for extended firepower.

He climbed to the roof, walking the stone-flagged flat area bounded by a three-foot-high buttressed wall. From there he was able to look out across the surrounding terrain.

He saw undulating grassland and timber and the thin gray snake of the narrow approach road. Moving around to the east side he stared out across the water. Mist hung over the jagged coastline extending away from Banecreif. Strong currents sent icy waves crashing against the base of the rocky cliff, the spray leaping high up the dark, weathered rock. Gantley felt the touch of rain and saw gray cloud sweeping in off the sea. He made contact with the roof sentries. The men wore thick parkas over their clothing against the chill. It started to rain heavily.

“Anything?” Gantley asked.

“Nothing, sir. If he’s coming he’s taking his time.”

“That could be deliberate,” Gantley said. “Trying to make us sweat.”

The sentry smiled. “Hardly likely in this bloody weather.”

“Well, don’t slack off just because he hasn’t shown yet. From what I’ve learned Cooper is no quitter. He’ll show.”

Gantley started back down into the house. His cell phone rang and he answered.

“It’s Harris. You need to hear this. Took me some time. There’s been a shut down on information coming from the cops. My contact in the information office finally came through. When the train arrived in Glasgow Breck and Chambers had already been found dead in the compartment Cooper booked. They had both been shot. Munro was found alive but with the back of his skull caved in.”

“Cooper?”

“No sign of a fourth man. He could have jumped the train anywhere after it crossed the border. He could be long gone.”

“No, Harris, he’s not gone. The man is on his way here.” Gantley checked his watch. An hour after midday. “He’s had plenty of time to make new travel arrangements. Keep me informed of any developments.”

Gantley ended the call and put his phone away. He crossed to stand at the wall again, scanning the surrounding countryside, nodding to himself.

“Come ahead, Mr. Cooper. I’m ready and waiting for you.”

21

Using the available guest computer Bolan had checked out Banecreif on Google's map site. It was a long drive down a rugged road that would take him to the easterly edge of the Scottish highlands. The road ran along the coast, the North Sea bordering the route. Remote. Isolated, with only a few scattered villages along the way. It would take Bolan the best part of a day to reach his destination. He didn't mind that because the delay in his travel would leave Canfield wondering when his unwelcome guest might turn up.

Checking out of the lodge Bolan asked the young woman behind the desk, the day-shift receptionist, to call him a taxi, explaining that his pickup had been postponed and he needed to locate a car rental agency. The closest agency was in the next town, a forty-minute ride away. The taxi turned up in short time and Bolan settled in the backseat. The journey took just over thirty minutes after Bolan promised the driver a bonus if he could get him to his destination quickly.

At the rental agency Bolan made the necessary negotiations and hired a late-model Volkswagen Toureg SE. The big 4x4 had auto transmission and even a touch-screen DVD navigation system. Its powerful engine would provide Bolan with the kind of horsepower needed to cover the long distance to the Scottish Highlands.

Leaving the rental agency Bolan spotted a convenience store and pulled in. He stocked up on a few sandwiches and bottles of water. Behind the wheel he tapped in the coordinates for his route and watched as the sharp image came on the screen. Pushing the stick into first Bolan settled into the comfortable leather seat and moved off.

LATE AFTERNOON, hours into his drive, Bolan was away from the sprawling bustle of Glasgow and heading north, toward Inverness and the eastern side of the country where he would eventually link up to the coast road that would lead him to Banecreif. He saw that he was heading into rough weather as dark clouds rolled in from the east, gathering into a storm bank

the farther he drove up-country. The road ahead stretched across low hills with little habitation save for a few farms scattered across the landscape. His original estimate was that he had roughly two hundred and seventy miles to cover—around six hours' driving. With the weather backing up, threatening rain, Bolan added to that time. However it worked out, it was going to be late by the time he reached his objective.

The realization did little to unnerve Bolan. A strike in the wee hours might work in his favor. It was the time when the most alert opponent lost a degree of his deductive powers. When the body naturally reached that twilight condition, slowing down. Leaving perceptions at a low ebb. Something to be taken advantage of.

When Bolan spotted a truck stop he pulled in. The small restaurant and store was hosting only a couple of drivers from the long-haul trucks parked outside. Bolan picked up a thermos flask from the store section, went to the restaurant counter and ordered a black coffee. At his request the red-haired woman serving filled his flask with more coffee. Bolan allowed himself a leisurely break, downing a second mug of coffee before settling his bill and leaving. He took a few minutes to walk around the parking area before he returned to the 4x4.

As he settled himself behind the wheel, securing his seat belt, the first fat drops of rain hit the windshield. By the time he had driven out of the parking lot and turned back onto the road the rain had increased to a hard downpour. Bolan flicked on the wipers, the built-in sensor determining how fast they needed to operate in order to clear the glass screen. It became gloomy enough that Bolan needed the headlights, as well. He set his speed and activated the cruise control, letting the vehicle take the strain.

Bolan drove through Inverness into a rain-filled night, the road swinging toward the coast. Beyond the town the strip of road ahead was dark and empty, leaving Bolan the opportunity to consider what lay ahead for him at Banecreif.

He had his mission to complete.

Retribution to deliver to Hugo Canfield.

THE UNBROKEN STORM followed Bolan all the way to his turnoff. He lost time negotiating the empty, winding main highway, only the powerful headlights of his vehicle breaking the darkness surrounding him. The

navigation system performed its task well, and Bolan easily found the narrow, single-lane road that led to Banecreif. According to the screen readout the road ran for two miles, dead-ending at Canfield's property. He cut the lights as he rolled the Toureg onto this feeder road, taking the first chance he got to turn the vehicle around and reverse into the cover of the trees and bushes edging the road. Bolan killed the engine. The drum of falling rain on the roof matched the distant crash of waves hitting the rocky shore close by.

He pulled his blacksuit and boots from his bag and changed. His shoulder rig held the Beretta 93-R. Len Watts had also provided an Uzi, still one of Bolan's favorite weapons. He slid a sheathed knife onto his belt. Snapping on a combat rig Bolan made sure the pouches held plastic ties and extra magazines for the Beretta and the Uzi. It was basic equipment, but enough for what he intended. He pulled on a black baseball cap to complete his transformation, slipped out of the vehicle and locked it, dropping the key into one of the blacksuit's zippered side pockets.

Using the faint moonlight Bolan headed in toward the dark bulk of Banecreif. Even at the distance he was from the house Bolan could see how it dominated the headland where it stood. Cold and brooding.

HUGO CANFIELD FOUND IT hard to sleep.

The early hours were the worst. Night was still hanging on, reluctant to relinquish its hold to the coming dawn. Canfield hated waking because he could never get back to sleep. This time was even worse. He couldn't get Cooper out of his mind. The man stalked through his thoughts. A spectral figure bringing death and destruction with every step. He had certainly done that to Canfield's operation.

It angered and interested him at the same time. The anger was easily explained. His interest in Cooper another matter. The man intrigued him. Canfield wished he could learn more about him. No getting away from the fact that Cooper was a hell of an opponent. He came through every confrontation ready for the next. Gained his information and acted on it. He had a relentless drive to him that pushed him ever forward, his mind like a guided missile, directing him to the next target. In a perverse way Canfield likened himself to Cooper. In their respective businesses they knew what they wanted and simply went for it, casting aside doubt and uncertainty.

If Cooper had allied himself with Hugo Canfield they would have made a formidable team. They would have been unstoppable.

Canfield pushed that out of his mind as quickly as it presented itself. Cooper was on the side of the good and righteous. No doubt about that.

The mix of conflicting thoughts denied Canfield any further rest. He left his bed, showered, shaved and got dressed. He made his way downstairs to the kitchen, craving coffee. He found Gantley already there. A mug of steaming black coffee was pushed across the work surface. Canfield took it.

“How did you know?” Canfield asked.

“It’s what you pay me for, sir. And I heard you in the shower when I passed your room ten minutes ago.”

“So, is everything secure?”

“As we can ever make it, sir,” Gantley said.

“Can we stop him? Given his recent record.”

“A bloody good try is what we can offer.”

“Not the best summation, Sergeant Gantley, but an honest one.”

BOLAN WALKED STEADILY, head down against the rain driving in from the seaward side of the track. The unpaved surface of the road had already become a soft morass of dark mud. He had only walked for a few hundred yards before the chill began to penetrate the blacksuit. There was nothing he could do to change that. Bolan kept moving, his mind focused on his objective.

He was there to make sure Hugo Canfield was taken down. That his organization was neutered. Venturer Exports would be reduced to ashes and scattered beyond repair.

That was going to require Bolan going on the hunt.

He had no qualms about that. All he had to do was recall the deaths of two task-force agents and the twenty-five Thai women and children dropped overboard from Canfield’s ship while locked inside a steel container.

Bolan wouldn’t derive satisfaction from whatever happened at Banecreif, but he would achieve some kind of closure for the dead.

And that would have to do.

Faint dawn light was edging away the night. The rain persisted, laying a misty curtain across the landscape. Bolan didn't mind that. It would offer some additional distraction for his approach. With Banecreif looming in front of him Bolan took to the ground, working his way through the wet grass, using every patch of shadow he could find until he was close enough to pick out the sentries.

Bolan studied the sentry as he slogged his way through the heavy waterlogged grass. Even though he was clad in a waterproof coat the man was probably chilled to the bone and hoping to be relieved. Bolan figured this would be the best time to take the man. He had probably been on duty for a long few hours. He would be tired and ready to get under cover.

The man moved by him. Bolan was no more than twenty feet away and was able to see the MP-5 the guard was carrying over one shoulder, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jacket.

The sentry paced on, pausing at the perimeter of his patch to look around, before slowly, reluctantly, turning and retracing his steps. By this time Bolan had moved in closer, so that when the sentry drew level with him, Bolan was almost under his feet. As the man reached the ideal position Bolan swept his legs from under him, dropping him flat on his back. Unprepared the guard hit the ground with a hard thump, gasping as the air was forced from his lungs. Before he could recover Bolan slammed a bunched fist against his jaw. The sentry grunted and lay still, momentarily stunned. It was enough time for Bolan to strip away his MP-5 and handgun, turn the man facedown and use a couple of plastic ties to secure wrists and ankles. He rolled the man back over and as the sentry shook away the dizziness Bolan slid the fighting knife from its sheath and pressed it against the man's exposed throat, applying just enough pressure so that the fine sheer edge cut into flesh, drawing a little blood and creating a prickly stinging sensation.

“Listen good,” Bolan said. “You have an easy choice. Give me the answers I want, or I lean on this knife a little harder and open your throat all the way.”

The sentry stared up at Bolan, only just able to see his face in the dawn light. But there was enough to recognize the hard, icy gleam in the eyes staring back at him.

“I say anything Gantley will—”

“Gantley isn’t the one you need to worry about, friend. It’s me you’re going to have to deal with. Right now I’m the most important man in the world.”

Bolan emphasized his words by drawing the blade a little deeper across the sentry’s throat, causing a warm trickle of blood to slide across taut flesh.

“Jesus...”

“I’d suggest it’s a little late to start getting religion. Are you ready to answer my question?”

The sentry stopped trying to free his bound wrists and nodded. “What?” he asked.

“How many more of you are there? And don’t make up numbers. I’m going to leave you here. Mess with me and I’ll come back and show you just how persuasive my friend here can be.”

“Okay, okay. One more on the ground like me. Two on the roof. One inside manning the security cameras. And Gantley.”

Bolan took hold of the sentry’s collar and dragged him through the grass until he reached the trees. He used the knife to cut a wide strip from the man’s waterproof coat and gagged him, propping him against the trunk of a tree. He searched the sentry’s coat and found a spare magazine for the MP-5. Returning to the spot where he had taken the man down Bolan picked up the MP-5. He swung the Uzi across his back, moving forward, his eyes searching for the second sentry.

It was the sentry who found Bolan. As the Executioner circled a heavy stand of tangled undergrowth the sentry appeared off to his right, picking up speed as he fixed Bolan’s position. The guard called out, raising his MP-5 and let go with a loose burst that chopped at the undergrowth, showering Bolan with debris.

Bolan dropped and rolled, propping himself on his elbows and returned fire. The sentry jerked aside, cursing wildly, and then hauled himself to a stop. His weapon tracked back in Bolan’s direction but he was a couple of

seconds too late. Bolan's second burst caught the man chest-high, a follow-up adding to the devastation as the 9 mm slugs cleaved into his body, tearing into his lungs and heart. The man uttered a high squeal, falling back and slamming to the ground.

Bolan scrambled to his feet and dug in his heels, angling across the open ground for the cover of the house. In his mind he was calculating how soon the sentries on the roof might respond.

The chatter of concentrated automatic fire answered his question as a pair of MP-5's opened up. Bolan heard the sodden thumps as 9 mm slugs tore at the rain-soaked ground around him. He ducked and weaved, presenting a constantly shifting target, feeling the impact as slugs struck closer than he wanted. The shooters were having to lean over the parapet as Bolan got closer to the house, the angle they were having to deal with making accurate fire difficult.

Bolan reached the rough stone wall, slamming against the unyielding surface and pausing for a moment. Shadows at the base of the wall helped to conceal him but he was aware that some of the 9 mm projectiles were also getting closer to the angle where the ground met the wall. By the law of averages he was soon going to feel one of those slugs. He glanced left and right. He saw a low-sited window a few yards away. He needed access to the house and a window was as good a way of entering as a door. He edged along the wall, taking himself away from the bursts of fire, albeit briefly.

The window was large, the sill no more than a couple of feet from ground level—an old, wooden sash-style window. Bolan pulled away from the window, raised the MP-5 and triggered the remaining magazine capacity at it. The burst of sustained fire shattered the glass from the frame and shredded the wood. Throwing his arms up to cover his face Bolan took a run at the empty gap and launched himself through the window, taking the remaining glass and wood with him. He landed on his feet, glass showering around him.

The first thing he did was eject the empty magazine and snap in his remaining full one. A glance around the room showed it in shadow, devoid of furniture. The door was on the far side. Bolan crossed to it, easing the handle and edging the door open to show the empty passage beyond.

The moment the sound of gunfire reached the security room, the guard in charge, Lou Trencher, snapped out of his half-sleep state and hit the exterior lights. Instantly the monitor screens were illuminated by the powerful lamps mounted around the outside of the house.

Damn, I should have had them on already, he thought.

Trencher knew he was in trouble. Once Gantley found out he had been slacking at his post it wouldn't matter if an intruder was out there. The former military cop would kill Trencher himself. Sergeant Gantley had a fetish about running the security team like a small army. And he had no patience with anyone who slipped below his standards.

The first thing Trencher saw was a body stretched out on the ground. He focused in with the camera controls, bringing the motionless form into sharp relief. He couldn't identify the man because he was lying facedown, but he did see the blood oozing from the ragged bullet wounds, being sluiced away by the rain still sweeping in across the grounds.

Trencher keyed the Send button on his internal handset.

"Intruder alert. West wall."

Trencher heard the rattle of more automatic fire. It was coming from somewhere overhead. The roof guards. They must have spotted the man. What was his name—Cooper.

Close by Trencher heard more gunfire. Then the shattering of glass. He realized it was coming from the room just along the passage from his security cubbyhole.

Is Cooper breaking in? he wondered.

Aware he had some making up to do Trencher snatched up his own MP-5, swinging around and stepping out into the passage. He flattened against the opposite wall.

He heard the rattle of the handle, saw the door pulled open. The room inside was dark. Trencher could hear the sound of rain splashing in through the shattered window.

Where was Cooper? *Why didn't the bastard show himself?*

He eased away from the wall, his finger curling against the submachine gun's trigger.

In the distance he heard someone shout his name. He recognized the harsh bark.

Sergeant Gantley.

The angry call drew Trencher to an involuntary halt, head turning in the direction of the sound.

What did the man want now?

Fuck you, Trencher thought, I got more important things to do.

He swung back toward the point of his interest. The empty doorway.

Only it wasn't empty any longer.

A black-clad figure stood there, the muzzle of his own weapon already tracking Trencher.

Oh, shit, Trencher thought.

Second time he had screwed up tonight.

Bolan hit the armed man with a solid burst from his MP-5. The blistering stream of 9 mm bullets cut into and through the guard's midtorso, kicking him back across the passage until the stone wall brought him to an abrupt stop. Trencher's finger squeezed back against the MP-5's trigger and a burst hit the ceiling overhead, flattening and spinning across the passage. Trencher slid to his knees, dropping his weapon and clutching at his wounds. The last thing he saw was the dark-clad figure turning and heading along the passage.

The Executioner had seen the flight of stone steps that led from the ground floor. The steps were set against the wall, steep, and disappeared into apparent darkness. As he sprinted up he felt the flow of chilled air that met him. The stairs curved slightly to the left and as Bolan followed the turn the cold air increased. His initial guess had been correct—the steps led to the roof. Above him now he made out the shape of a heavy wooden door, partly ajar. The last few stone risers were wet from rain that had blown in through the gap.

He drew himself tight against the cold wall, using his foot to edge the door wide, giving it a final hard shove. The door swung wide, banging against something solid.

Bolan went through fast, dropping to a crouch and veering to the left, his MP-5 tracking ahead, searching for targets.

He had two armed men on the roof. Aware of his presence. Now that the high-mounted lights had been activated there was a degree of illumination spilling across the rain-swept flat area.

That light would expose the two guards *and* Bolan.

A hunched shape cut through Bolan's field of vision, firing as he moved. Bolan heard the hard snap of the slugs as they struck the stone behind him, so he changed direction, following the man and also searching for guard number two.

More automatic fire. Bolan felt hot stone chips bite his left cheek. He swung around in response, seeing the still-moving shape. He pushed the MP-5's muzzle around and kept the guard in his sights for a couple of seconds. His finger eased back on the trigger, sending a burst at the man. The guard stumbled, a muffled curse on his lips. He still managed to fire back, his slugs clanging against a metal ventilation duct only a few feet away from Bolan. Bolan dropped, rolled, then dragged himself away from his position, working his way into a stand of heating and ventilation ducts, letting the complex shadows conceal his black shape. It wasn't going to hide him for long, but he needed a moment to check out the relative placing of his opponents.

He was a second away from raising his head when the faintest crunch of a boot against the stone roof slabs reached his ears.

The sound came from too close to his right.

The second guard. Moving in for the kill.

Bolan rolled over on his back, sensing the dark bulk rearing above him. In the fragment of light that fell across the section Bolan saw the rain-slick face, arms extending the man's MP-5, the shiny surface of the waterproof jacket. The light gave his eyes a cold, metallic gleam.

His MP-5 had moved with Bolan, an extension of his body, and he triggered the weapon the instant he locked on to the guard. Bolan kept his finger on the trigger, expending the remaining half of the magazine, pumping the 9 mms into the man's torso. The close range pushed the slugs through, blowing out the spine in a bloody spatter of flesh and splintered bone. The guard gave a strangled groan as he toppled away from Bolan and crashed down hard on the stone roof slabs.

Bolan threw the empty MP-5 aside and pulled the Uzi into position as he turned back to face the remaining guard. He worked his way out from

the stand of pipes as the man, ducking and weaving as he sought a clear shot, was silhouetted against the bright glare from one of the spotlights.

The guard realized his error and turned to step out from the light.

Bolan's reflex action triggered the Uzi. He used a tried-and-tested figure eight, stitching the guard from chest to crotch, the man jerking from the impact of the 9 mm burn. He bounced against the stone slabs, his MP-5 slipping from his grasp. A second burst from the Uzi took a section of his skull off, ending the fight.

A moment of calm descended as Bolan eased to his feet, though his left shoulder ached from slamming against something when he had dropped to the roof and he had a faint ringing in his ears from the harsh chatter of automatic fire. He turned his face to the falling rain, letting the cold water refresh his senses.

He didn't hear the soft footfall behind him. Only sensed that he wasn't alone a split second before something struck him across the back of his skull and he dropped to his knees, the shadows turning even blacker.

Bolan felt fingers working his combat rig loose, dragging it off his body, then freeing the holstered Beretta. He struggled against the dark mist fogging his senses, aware that the knife was being stripped from its sheath. The Uzi had gone from his grasp as he had been driven to his knees. He struggled upright, swaying as he gained his feet, turning about at the harsh voice ringing out.

“All right, son, so you’re the tough man? Christ, you don’t look so hard to me.”

The man facing Bolan was his height, broader across the shoulders and chest. His hair was cropped close to his skull, glistening with rain. He wore dark military fatigues, heavy boots on his feet. Bolan saw him unclip the holstered pistol on his hip and place it on one of the exhaust ducts. Then he was flexing massive fists, covered by thin black leather gloves, as he faced Bolan.

This *had* to be Sergeant Gantley. Canfield’s minder.

“Fuckin’ Yanks. Too much money and fancy ordnance. All that bullshit about being the best.”

Bolan didn’t reply. He was using every second to recharge his reserves because he was going to need them. It was why Gantley had deprived him of his weapons. The man was ready to use his hands.

They squared off in the predawn paleness. Rain still sweeping in across the slabbed roof of Banecreif.

“Come on, then, Cooper,” Gantley taunted. “What is it you arseholes say—give me your best shot.”

Even in the low light Bolan could see the perverse smile edging Gantley’s thick lips. He realized that the man was anticipating the upcoming conflict and expecting to enjoy it.

Gantley moved forward, impatient because Bolan was refusing to move. In his eyes that would only confirm what he felt about Americans.

All show and no go.

Bolan let him close in, saving his strength for what was to come. Gantley had left him no choice. He was going to have to fight, or allow Gantley to beat him to death.

The Brit swung a powerful fist. His left. A clumsy feint. Bolan eased away from it, his eye on Gantley's right, which was looping around in a blur. He ducked under the powerful swing and leaned in to deliver two hard punches to Gantley's ribs. Bolan concentrated his power into the blows and though Gantley's muscular torso absorbed much of the impact there was enough to make him grunt and step back. Bolan caught the lips peeling back from Gantley's teeth in an angry snarl.

He can be hurt, Bolan thought, and he doesn't like it.

The next attack came swiftly. Despite his bulk Gantley could move fast, his upper body weaving. His long arms enabled him to swing early, still just beyond Bolan's stretch. He didn't feint this time, simply lashed out with both fists. His left caught Bolan across the side of his face, knocking the big American off balance. The blow was hard, not crippling, but left Bolan smarting, blood running down his cheek from a fresh gash.

Bolan pulled away, saw the thin smirk on Gantley's rain-slick face as he retreated. Then he brought himself to a stop, catching Gantley off-kilter for a second. It was enough time for Bolan to slam his fist full into Gantley's mouth. The blow split Gantley's lips, blood blossoming as flesh was hammered back against his teeth. Bolan held his attack, throwing hard punches to Gantley's mouth and cheeks, rocking the man's head from side to side. Gantley took steps back, seemingly confused by the sudden and unrelenting attack. Bolan changed tack without warning, using his booted foot to deliver hard sidekicks to Gantley's left knee. The blows hurt Gantley. His leg was weakening, his reflex blows uncoordinated, missing more than connecting. He could not contain his anger. Gantley was not used to being hurt, even opposed, and he had to gather himself with a great effort, sucking in his rage and concentrating his efforts.

One of his large fists caught Bolan's left wrist, yanking his arm to pull Bolan in close. He batted aside Bolan's free arm, then swung him aside with the ease of a child casting off an unwanted toy. Bolan was thrown across the roof, losing his grip on the wet stone. He went to his knees, throwing his hands out to prevent contact with the solid slabs. He knew immediately that he had to get back on his feet. Gantley would be moving in. Before Bolan could stand upright Gantley's thick arms encircled his neck, closing tight

like the coils of a snake as he hauled Bolan to his knees. Bolan could hear him snorting through his bloody mouth as he bore down.

Bolan sucked in a breath before Gantley's stranglehold cut off his air. Knowing his time would be short Bolan reached up and back, getting a grip on Gantley's fatigue jacket. He hauled hard, letting his body drop from the waist. The leverage worked and Gantley was dragged up and over Bolan's head, in a perfect shoulder roll. As he thudded to the stone slabs his grip on Bolan's neck slackened and Bolan rolled free, turning his body and slamming his right boot full into Gantley's face. Gantley's nose simply collapsed under the kick. Blood erupted from the crushed organ.

Rolling again to gain distance Bolan staggered to his feet. He saw Gantley doing the same, and not wanting to give the man any leeway he launched a full roundhouse kick that hammered into Gantley's chest, driving him backward. Continuing his forward run Bolan had almost reached Gantley when the Brit hooked his own right leg around and kicked Bolan's legs from under him.

The drop to the slabs left Bolan struggling for air. He saw Gantley rise over him, fists opening and closing in unison. Bolan drew his legs under himself and pushed upright. He swung at Gantley, drawing blood from the man's left cheek. Bolan didn't see Gantley's left sweep up out of nowhere. It struck him across the side of his face with a meaty thump. Bolan recoiled from the blow, tasting blood in his mouth. He backpedaled and slammed against the buttressed stone wall edging the roof, gasping from the impact.

The man was not going to give him time to recover. Even as the thought crossed his mind Bolan sensed movement, saw the shadow that fell across the stone slabs at his feet. He heard the grunt of exertion as Gantley launched another fist. Bolan yanked his head to one side, the solid knuckles raking the curve of his jaw. Although the full force of the blow was reduced, there was enough energy to spin Bolan off balance. Bolan heard the scuff of Gantley's boots as the man moved to keep up with him. He threw up his left arm and took a solid blow just below his shoulder, then hauled himself around and countered with his right fist, slamming it hard into Gantley's ribs. The blow drew a grunt from the man and he retreated briefly, giving Bolan time to slam a booted foot against the Brit's knee again.

Gantley pulled back, struggling to maintain his balance and Bolan thrust himself forward, driving his shoulder into the man's broad chest, then

launching a forearm smash that impacted against Gantley's cheek. The sheer force of the blow fractured the cheekbone. Bolan delivered a second punch, increasing the damage. Flesh tore and a shard of splintered cheekbone showed white before blood discolored it.

The pain he must have felt only increased Gantley's fury. He caught hold of Bolan's blacksuit with both hands and hurled him across the stone flags. Losing his balance Bolan had seconds to throw out his arms to break his fall as he went down for the second time. He landed hard, bouncing and tumbling across the weathered slabs, scraping his face against the rough surface. He felt the wash of warm blood streaking across his cheek and mouth. The low stone wall edging the roof brought him to a bone-jarring stop.

Bolan could hear the heavy crash of the surging tide slamming against the rocks at the base of the east wall behind and below. Twisting his head he saw Gantley advancing. Blood streamed down his face and spattered the front of his fatigues. Gantley still looked every inch the hard man he was. His solid bulk did nothing to hinder his movements and he lunged forward without warning, slamming into Bolan as he pushed to his feet, aware of the low wall at his back. He was too late to move aside and Gantley crushed him against the stonework, massive hands clamping around Bolan's throat. Bolan felt his spine driven against the lip of the wall. He braced his booted feet and pushed back against Gantley's sheer bulk. The man was snorting with the effort he was putting into his attack. Hot breath fanned Bolan's face. He felt Gantley's thick fingers squeezing down on his neck, starting to deny him air.

Bolan sensed *déjà vu*. Gantley's arms were around his neck again. If he was unable to draw in oxygen his responses would begin to falter. He spun through his options, realizing they were few. Gantley had him pinned against the wall so there was no retreat that way. The man's brute strength, spread against Bolan, held him near motionless. Only Bolan's arms were free. He spread them for a moment, closing his hands into fists, then struck out at Gantley's face—first against the already damaged cheek, then to the other side of the Brit's face. Every ounce of Bolan's not inconsiderable strength went into the blows, delivered without mercy. He maintained the two-sided attack, slamming his knuckled fists against Gantley's face, seeing it turn even more bloody and raw.

Gantley increased his grip on Bolan's throat and it became a simple contest between the two—who would quit first. Bolan centered his whole being on his unrestrained physical assault on his opponent, his fists aching from the contact with Gantley's head. And it was Gantley who jerked back, gasping from the relentless blows slamming into his battered flesh. As his grip on Bolan's throat slackened Bolan planted his left hand on Gantley's chest and accelerated his withdrawal, pulling back his right arm to aim a telling blow that landed square against Gantley's already smashed nose. Blood erupted in bright streams.

Howling with pain Gantley stumbled back, raising his hands to his ruined face and Bolan went directly for his unprotected stomach and ribs, pounding in blow after blow that brought the former military cop to a stop. Gantley let out a shuddering moan, starting to fold. Bolan dropped his hands on Gantley's shoulders, pushing down as he swept his right knee up to smash into Gantley's face. The blow straightened Gantley, his face a caved-in bloody mask. He didn't even see as Bolan stepped in close, turning, then hauling Gantley over his shoulder in a body throw that launched the Brit off his feet. There was a surreal moment when Gantley seemed to hang in the empty air, then a long scream as he vanished over the buttressed wall, out into empty space before the long drop to the granite rocks at the base of the house.

Gantley's scream faded as he fell, ceasing the instant he struck the rocks.

The Executioner retrieved his Beretta after he finally located it, then crawled on hands and knees back to the base of the wall where he leaned against the stone, head hanging, dripping blood. Waves of nausea engulfed him. The only way he might have described his condition was as one big bruise. He was aching from head to foot. Bloody and sick. Even his hands hurt. His knuckles were raw and bleeding. He raised his aching head back against the cold, rough stone of the wall, wishing the rain would wash away his pain. He knew he had to move soon. To go find Hugo Canfield and complete his mission.

In the end he didn't need to do even that.

Something told him Canfield would find him, and Bolan was too exhausted to climb to his feet there and then.

From where he sat he could see the door that led back down into the house. A square of light against the graying dawn. He fixed his gaze on the doorway and waited. Something stirred in him, warning that Canfield was going to come to him. Bolan's battered right hand grasped the Beretta, drawing it close to his side where it was hidden by his thigh. He moved the selector lever to tri-bursts.

He waited.

The minutes crawled. When he breathed Bolan felt a stab of pain across his ribs down his right side. He laid his left hand across his body, pressed over the ache. He hoped they were simply bruised and not cracked.

He saw the shadow first, moving against the stone wall just inside the open stairwell. Bolan fixed on it, watched it pause, then rise higher. He could see the head and shoulders. The extended outline of a weapon. The form grew larger. It was the bulk of a tall man carrying an easily recognizable SPAS combat shotgun.

The man chose his weapons well, Bolan thought.

His grip on the Beretta tightened.

Hugo Canfield stepped through the open door, moving quickly to one side to avoid being framed. His searching eyes picked up on Bolan's motionless form, the shotgun coming around to center on the Executioner.

"Tell me you're still alive, Cooper. I want you alive, you interfering son of a bitch, so I can blow you to hell and back."

Bolan didn't respond. He needed Canfield to walk closer so he had a clear shot.

"Just move. Enough so I know you can see who it is putting you down. Damn you, Cooper, fucking move. You hear me? Thought you'd won? I'll get through this. Rebuild. Come through even stronger. Do you bloody well hear me..?"

Bolan heard him.

He showed he had heard by bringing up the concealed Beretta.

He saw the shock on Canfield's face in the instant before he fired.

He placed a triple burst that cored between Canfield's eyes and into his brain. He followed with two more, dropping the man where he stood, his finger frozen on the trigger of the shotgun. Canfield sprawled on the rain-soaked roof of Banecreif, his shattered skull leaking blood and brains across the slabs.

"You talk too much," Bolan said.

He let his gun hand drop to his side. Despite the wet and the cold he was too tired to move for the moment, so he stayed where he was as dawn crept over the horizon.

HAL BROGNOLA ANSWERED his phone and for a moment failed to recognize who was on the other end. It was only when he picked up the word *Banecreif* that he realized it was Bolan.

"Hey, Striker, you sound a little rough."

"It's been one of those days."

"You get your result?"

"The organization is minus its head boy. Banecreif might be open for a new tenant. After some redecoration."

"Do I pass our findings along to the task force now? They are going to think Christmas has come early. I've already had reports of Canfield's associates starting to jump ship and getting lawyered up."

“The whole package. Have a word with Aaron. He should have completed his excavations into the databases we downloaded. I figure the task force will be knocking on quite a few doors in the next week or so.”

“Hey, thanks for your input, pal. We can start to pick up the pieces and step in. No doubt there’s going to be some raised voices heard but with Canfield out of the frame and most of his major setups out of action...well, I guess you see the situation should work in our favor once we start producing the downloaded data.”

“Before I moved out I found the drug stash Canfield had on-site.”

“His new venture?”

“Yeah. Hell of a size, too. I didn’t like to leave all that white powder lying around in the basement. Anyone could have wandered in and found it.”

“I understand.”

“Happens that Canfield kept a fuel backup in one of the outhouses with Banecreif being off the track. Diesel and gasoline. I jury-rigged supply hoses to feed in through the extraction vents to the basement. Those storage tanks held quite a few gallons. Made one hell of a blaze.”

“Are you clear, Striker?”

“Way down the road. Couple of police cruisers went by a while back, but I’m observing the speed limit and out of uniform.”

Brognola sighed.

“Thank God for that. Hey, you sound bushed. You need any help?”

“The final quarter got a little rough. I held my own but took some whacks.”

“You fit to drive?”

“Slowly.”

“Keep your cell handy. I’ll see what I can fix through the U.K. task force. Make a rendezvous for you. Hell, they owe you that much. No, dammit, we *all* owe you.”

“Keep an open file on this dirty business, Hal, because it isn’t finished yet. If no one else does I’ll be coming back to it. Sooner or later I’ll be coming back. And that’s a promise.”

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DESPERATE CARGO

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